The Vicious Mole

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The Vicious Mole

Nestled into a stout stone corner of the city's trade ward, The Vicious Mole stands as a squat, broad-shouldered building, unmistakably dwarven in its craftsmanship. Thick timber beams —dark with age and smoke—brace the structure inside and out. The heavy oaken door is banded in iron, its handle shaped like a forge-hammer. A hand-carved plaque above reads: “Ale Strong Enough to Waken the Dead.”

Stepping inside, visitors are greeted by a warm, smoky ambiance laced with the scents of spiced meats, fresh bread, and aged pine. The heart of the tavern is its grand stone hearth, crackling merrily with a roaring fire. Suspended above it, a spit often turns slow-roasted boar or game hen, and nearby sits a cast-iron kettle of stew simmering gently for hours. The fire’s glow reflects off polished wooden beams and stone floor tiles, which are softened underfoot by worn bear and direwolf pelts, collected from the high passes during the dwarves' youth.

The tavern floor is set with twelve thick oak tables, each paired with matching benches or chairs carved with traditional dwarven knotwork. Deep scratches and old mug rings speak of countless tales, toasts, and scuffles long past. Every table boasts a tin candleholder and a small brass bell for summoning service.

Mounted along the walls, trophies of the hunt dominate the scene—grinning boar heads, a snarling cave bear, and even a pair of well-preserved owlbear claws, splayed wide for dramatic effect. Above the mantle hangs a cracked shield emblazoned with the dwarves' ancestral crest—a mountain split by a hammer and anvil.

Behind the long, heavy bar counter, made of a single slab of aged mountain oak, the male dwarf (stout and bearded like a beer barrel himself) often tends the drinks. The counter is etched with runes of hospitality, and covered in old knife marks and spilt spirits. Behind it, tiered wooden shelves display a rainbow of bottled spirits, clay mugs, and metal tankards, all neatly stacked. Pewter steins hang from hooks like sleeping bats, each engraved with initials —regular patrons' personal mugs. A small glass case houses curious trinkets and knick-knacks: a dragonborn’s scale, a cracked obsidian die, a tooth from a sea beast, and a pair of dice made from knuckle bones.

Wall sconces of wrought iron hold slow-burning torches, and every corner flickers with candlelight, casting dancing shadows across carved columns and low wooden ceilings. The tavern smells of smoke, oil, pine resin, and hearty food—earthy and alive.

A wooden staircase winds up to the eight guest rooms above. Each is modest but solid: feather beds with furs, small writing desks, and latching shutters. A narrow hallway leads to the bathhouse, where water is heated in cauldrons and poured into copper tubs. Next door, the laundry room hums with drying linens strung between pulleys, and the faint scent of lavender soap.

A locked hatch behind the bar leads to the stone cellar, a vast chamber beneath the tavern. Here, immense barrels of ale and wine are stacked in neat rows, banded in iron and marked with chalk symbols and dwarven script. Smaller casks rest on shelves beside crates of preserved goods and smoked meats. The air is cool, sweet with ferment, and echoing with the faint drip of condensation.

No matter the weather or worries outside, The Vicious Molealways feels like the inside of a mountain: warm, secure, and built to last. It is a refuge not only of food and drink, but of story and comfort—a home away from home.

The sun slanted through the stout shutters of the Stonebrew private quarters, spilling golden light onto the stone walls and thick woolen blankets of their bed. Bilo groaned, one eye cracked open beneath a heavy brow. The familiar scent of woodsmoke and last night's ale clung to his beard like a badge of honor. Ulga was already up. Her half of the bed was empty, the blankets cool. Somewhere beyond the door, he heard the scrape of iron against stone and the creak of cellar hinges. That meant inventory.

Ulga stood in the kitchen with her sleeves rolled high, her braid slung over one shoulder, quill tucked behind one ear. A large slate board hung above the hearth where she jotted notes with chalk.

"Two sacks barley flour... one cracked. Four jugs of honey—down to the dregs. Cheese, nearly out. Spices—we're down to nutmeg and dried thyme, and that won't do for stew. Salted pork's gone, the rat-boys had a midnight snack, most like. Hells, Bilo!" she shouted toward the living quarters, "If you don't haul yourself up, we'll be haggling with the mushroom farmers by midday!"

Bilo's boots thudded as he entered, rubbing his eyes and adjusting his belt. "I'm up, woman, I'm up. Don't start throwing ladles yet." He squinted at the inventory. "We need beef, mutton, turnips, onions, redroots, cabbage, wild garlic, cheeses—both goat and cow—milk, butter, fresh loaves, cracked pepper, smoked paprika if old Jorben has it, dried lavender, and the good honey from the Silver Apiary. You're planning that stew again, eh?"

"I am, and this time we'll not water it down. Not with those city lads coming in from the foundry. They pay in coin, not copper."

Outside, their mule Bristleback was already harnessed to the stout wagon, its wheels oiled and ready. They rolled out into the bustling heart of the city's morning market. The cobbled streets rang with the clatter of hooves, calls of vendors, and laughter of children dodging carts. Bilo guided the wagon while Ulga sat beside him, arms crossed, eyes scanning for known sellers.

First stop was Bertha Ironkettle's spice stall. The elderly gnome adjusted her goggles and squinted up.

"Ulga! You looking to flavor half the city again?"

"Only the half that pays their tabs, Bertha. What's the price on smoked paprika today?"

Bertha chuckled. "Three silvers an ounce."

"Three? You trying to rob me in daylight?" Ulga barked, slamming a copper down. "One silver, and I'll take a bundle of dried lavender too. That stew won't stir itself."

They haggled like hammer and tongs, eventually settling on one and a half silver for a generous portion and a sprig of fresh bay leaf thrown in.

They passed through the Merchant's Arch and entered the stone-paved expanse of the Trade Square. Already, vendors were shouting over one another, hawking goods from under colorful awnings and carts.

"Morning, Ulga! Morning, Bilo!" came a cheery wave from Hensrick, the spice merchant, standing behind crates of bright saffron, crushed cardamom, and bundles of bay leaf.

"Morning, lad!" Bilo bellowed. "Still waterin' yer cinnamon, I see!"

"Only to make it last, Master Stonebrew!"

They haggled with Hensrick over saffron and peppercorns before moving on to other vendors. From Gilda the cheesemonger they bought two wheels of cave-aged cheddar and a basket of soft white goat cheese wrapped in herbs. Bilo teased her mercilessly about her broken scale, but in the end paid fairly—after a round of boastful negotiation that drew a small crowd.

From Marso, the broad-shouldered butcher with hands like cleavers, they bought several cuts of fresh beef, boar ribs, and a large haunch of venison. Ulga leaned over the counter, squinting at the marbled meat.

"I want that strip for stew. Looks like it came off a beast that knew how to run."

"That's a discerning tongue ye've got," Marso chuckled. "But it'll cost ye."

"Only if ye throw in that smoked marrow bone," Ulga snapped back.

They piled their cart high with produce—leeks, yellow onions, wild mushrooms, red potatoes, parsnips, green beans, garlic bulbs, and winter squash. From the dairy stall, they bought two jugs of cow's milk and a sealed crock of honey thick as molasses. Bilo nearly tipped the wagon over loading the last crate of eggs, and Ulga cuffed him for being a clumsy ox.

By midday, they were trundling back to The Vicious Mole with their cart brimming and their purses much lighter. Mildok Copperhand, their halfling helper, was napping on a wine crate out front when the wagon pulled in.

"Oi, up ye get!" Bilo barked. "Wagon's heavier than a troll's conscience."

Mildok leapt to his feet and rubbed his eyes. “What, already? I thought ye said you were just poppin’ out for a nibble!”

Behind him, Thora Ambergrip appeared with her sleeves rolled and a cloth tied over her head.

“Come on then,” she muttered. “Let’s get it in before the stew’s cold and Bilo eats raw onions again.”

Together, they unloaded the supplies—vegetables and perishables went into the cold cellar, sacks and jars into the pantry, meats into the icebox crates lined with enchanted stones. The kitchen bustled with motion, chatter, and the occasional complaint.

As the afternoon lengthened, Ulga and Thora took over the kitchen while Bilo returned to tapping kegs in the cellar. A thick aroma soon filled the tavern—the beef stew of the day, built from bone stock, tender meat, root vegetables, garlic, and a medley of herbs, simmered in a cast-iron pot as large as a dwarf's shield.

Thora stirred it thoughtfully. “Needs a bit more pepper.”

“Aye, and toss in that marrow bone,” Ulga added. “Let the stew tell ‘em it was born in a warrior’s belly.”

They laughed, and the tavern began to smell like home. The fire roared, Pickles snored, and Bilo’s voice echoed from below as he sang to the barrels again.

“Ale’s whisperin’ it’s time, lass. We best open the doors.”

“Just a moment,” Ulga said, lifting a wooden ladle to her lips. “Let’s see if we can make ‘em cry with joy tonight.”

In the cool shadows of the Vicious Mole’s stone cellar, Bilo Stonebrew stood motionless for a moment between the towering ale barrels, their thick iron bands glinting in the torchlight. Each one stood three times his height, carved with old clan runes and the marks of distant breweries, their bellies filled with dark, potent brew. The air was rich with the deep tang of malt and ferment, damp stone, and oiled wood.

He hefted a smaller barrel from a rack—chest-high to him, but still heavy as a stubborn mule—and braced it under the brass spigot of the eldest cask, affectionately named “Braga’s Pride.” With a grunt, he turned the tap, and the thick, almost black ale gushed out in a frothing stream, slapping against the insides of the smaller barrel with a heavy slosh.

“Ahhh, there ye are, me beauty,” Bilo whispered, watching the stream as if it were gold. “Dark as a drow's boot and strong enough to flatten a hill giant.”

Once filled, he wheeled the barrel upstairs, muscles bulging with effort, and rolled it behind the wide bar counter. With a practiced twist, he uncorked the tap, drew a fresh clay mug, and poured himself the first draught. He lifted it high, eyes gleaming.

“To another day in the belly o’ the mountain,” he declared, and downed the entire mug in one continuous pour. Foam clung to his mustache as he slammed the mug to the counter with a clap like a dropped shield.

“AAAAHRRRGHHH,” he bellowed, releasing a monstrous belch that echoed across the rafters. “Now that’s a war cry.”

He reached under the counter, drew out a cloth, and began polishing mugs with rhythmic precision, muttering to himself and scowling at each smudge.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the clatter of knives and the scent of roasting bones filled the air. Ulga stood at the chopping block, her thick arms moving like pistons as she diced carrots, parsnips, and green onion. Beside her, Thora Ambergrip worked on cubing beef and tossing it into the iron stew pot, already bubbling with herbs and marrow bone.

“Watch yer cut, Thora,” Ulga said, not looking up. “Last time ye left half the fat on, and I’m still chewin’ it a week later.”

Thora grunted. “You want it lean, you carve it yerself, boss.”

In the main room, Mildok slouched near the counter, whittling at a piece of driftwood and looking suspiciously idle. Bilo noticed him and didn’t miss a beat.

“Mildok, ye lazy flea-humper!” Bilo barked, hurling a polished mug at the halfling's head. It missed by an inch and clattered off a wall-mounted bear skull. “Go scrub the outhouse, it smells like a troll’s backside!”

Mildok yelped and ducked. “I was just—aye, I’m goin’, I’m goin’! No need to commit murder!”

“Don’t come back till the air’s fit for elf lungs, ye scamp.”

With a dramatic groan, Mildok shuffled out the back, grumbling curses in halfling slang.

Bilo swung the tavern doors open. The midday sun sent a warm wash of light through the entryway, catching dust motes in its golden stream. He wiped his hands on his apron and stood with arms crossed, proud and alert.

Within minutes, the first customers arrived. An old elf, bent and elegant, stepped through with the grace of someone who’d once been a dancer or duelist. His robes were deep green with threadbare embroidery, and his silver-white hair hung loose down his back.

“Well met, Master Stonebrew,” the elf said in a voice like wind through leaves. “Is the fire warm and the ale bold today?”

“Both, if ye’re lucky,” Bilo grinned. “Take a seat, and we’ll test your teeth with stew.”

The elf nodded, drifting toward a table near the hearth. Behind him bounced a young halfling girl with freckles, wind-tousled hair, and a lute strapped across her back.

“I heard this place serves drinks strong enough to stop your heart,” she chirped. “And I’m keen to test that claim!”

“Careful,” Ulga called from the kitchen window. “We don’t offer refunds on souls.”

The halfling giggled and plopped herself onto a stool, tapping the bell with eager fingers.

Bilo brought mugs and ladled out two bowls of stew, sliding them across the counter with a practiced flair.

“That’s one gold for the stew, and a silver for the ale,” he said.

The elf handed over his coins in silence, sipping his drink like it was poetry. The halfling tossed hers with a wink.

As the tavern settled into a quiet buzz, a new figure stepped into the doorway—tall, lean, and road-dusty. A human traveler, wrapped in a gray wool cloak, his boots caked with mud and his beard trimmed but sun-bleached.

He approached the counter with tired eyes. “You rent rooms here?”

“Aye,” Bilo said, sizing him up. “8 gold gets ye a night in a clean bed and a lock that works. You want bathhouse access too?”

“Please. And a meal, if it’s hot.”

“Ulga!” Bilo called back. “One stew and a key for this weary soul!”

Ulga appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. “Room Five’s got a fresh quilt. And the bath’s just been scrubbed, if ye don’t mind sharing it with Thora’s ghost stories.”

The traveler nodded, dropping a handful of silver coins onto the counter. Bilo slid a brass key across and pointed toward the stairs.

“Up the hall, second on the right. Bucket of hot water’s already in the room. Meal’ll be up in a moment.”

The traveler gave a faint smile. “This place feels... older than it looks.”

“Aye,” Bilo said with a smirk. “That’s because it is. Now go wash the road off ye, and try not to snore like the last bloke. He nearly brought the beams down.”

The traveler gave a tired chuckle and headed upstairs.

With the stew thickening, the fire roaring, and tankards clinking under torchlight, the Vicious Mole was officially awake.

The stair creaked gently under Thora Ambergrip’s weight as she ascended with a wide clay bowl steaming with beef stew. A thick cloth draped over her forearm to protect against the heat. She reached Room Five and gave the door two sharp raps.

“Meal’s here,” she called.

The door opened a crack, revealing the road-worn face of the human traveler. He nodded in thanks and stepped aside, letting the rich scent of stew fill the modest room. Thora stepped in, placing the bowl on a small oaken table beside the bed.

“Eat while it’s hot,” she said. “That one’s got marrow, so mind the bones.”

The traveler gave a faint smile and dropped another silver coin on the table as a tip. Thora snorted, half-amused, half-approving, and gave him a curt nod before turning on her heel.

Next, she made her way to the bathhouse. With brisk efficiency, she lit the copper-bellied hearth under the water cauldrons, poured ladles of steaming water into three stone basins, and sprinkled dried mint and lavender from a small satchel hanging at her waist. Steam began to curl along the tiled walls as she tested the temperature with a knuckle.

Once satisfied, she carried two wooden buckets upstairs and placed them beside the traveler’s room.

“Bath’s ready if yer bones ache,” she called through the door. “No drownin’. We charge extra for corpse removal.”

Meanwhile, downstairs, Bilo was leaning over a chalkboard slab bolted to the front wall near the bar. With a thick piece of white chalk, he scrawled in heavy, confident runes and blocky common script:

“News & Notices — Vicious Mole Tavern
Bard Night returns! This Windsday after last bell! Bring coin, ears, and tolerance.
Mirthwood Brewery Festival begins in two weeks—beer tasting contests!
Looking for a good game of Dragonbones? See Bilo. Betting starts at 1 silver.
Lost: One copper-plated tankard with the initials ‘R.K.’ Reward offered if returned intact.
NO singing gnomes allowed before sunset. —Bilo”

He finished with a flourish, blew chalk dust from his fingers, and admired his work. The tavern doors creaked again as more boots crossed the threshold—eight new patrons, in ones and twos, spread out through the space with the comfortable rhythm of regulars.

Mugs of ale clanked against the bar, and laughter began to spill into the air. Two tables pulled together in the corner became the staging ground for dice games, shouts of “double sixes!” and groans of loss. One half-elf tried to cheat and was promptly caught, resulting in some mild shoving and a tankard to the face. Bilo defused it with a bellow.

“Sit down or pay for new teeth!”

By mid-afternoon, the tavern was alive with warmth, noise, and the good-natured chaos of day drinkers.

Then came the scrape of iron-shod boots.

The door creaked open slowly to reveal Valar Stonemantle, a dwarven warrior with a beard like smoke-wool and one eye covered by a metal patch shaped like a raven's wing. His armor bore fresh scuffs and a splash of something green that looked like it shouldn’t have been alive.

He stomped in without a word and took the corner seat behind the bar where he always sat when he came through Mirthwood.

“Bilo,” he growled. “Ale. And keep it flowin’.”

“Aye, Valar,” Bilo said with a grin. “Thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“Was. Killed the ditch and walked out,” Valar said as he raised his mug and drained it in one pull.

A few mugs later, his tongue loosened.

“You ever heard of Vesperith?” he muttered.

Bilo looked up from drying a mug. “Sounds like a perfume. Or a curse.”

Valar chuckled darkly.

“Both,” he said. “Vesperith Leechking. I crossed blades—or more like bile—with it last month. South of Barrowcrag. Used to be someone important… priest, king, executioner maybe. Took a wrong path chasing immortality. Ended up twisted. Now it squats in the ruins

of its own throne hall, ruling nothing but lies and rot. Wears a crown of boneworms. Mutters old decrees to the air, like he still has a court."

Bilo leaned forward, intrigued. Around them, a few patrons grew quiet, listening.

"It's not just a monster. It's a whole colony of leeches wearin' a body. They crawl in and out of its skin—eyes, mouth, even the throat. Some of 'em scout for it, some of 'em feed. It needs blood, aye, but not just any. Royal blood, or holy. That's what fuels its powers. Flesh blood just keeps it twitchin'."

He paused, staring into his ale.

"And when it sits on its throne, the stones cry. I swear it. Statues leak ichor, bones sprout moss and mold. You can't even pray in that place. No blessing holds."

The fire crackled in the hearth. A few customers exchanged glances, half-fascinated, half-disturbed.

"Did you kill it?" asked the freckled halfling girl from earlier.

Valar drained another mug and exhaled slowly.

"I made it bleed. That's all I could do."

The tavern returned to motion—cards slapped the table, dice clattered in wooden cups, and more orders rolled in.

"Another stew, Ulga!" Bilo called.

"Tell 'em to grow another stomach!" she shouted back.

The Vicious Mole roared on, cradled in wood and fire, thick with tales and ale, a hearth in the heart of Mirthwood.

In the heart of Mirthwood, where cobbled alleys weave between old stone and newer trade halls, The Vicious Mole sits like a dwarven stronghold in miniature—fire-lit, ale-rich, and louder than a forge on feast day. Inside, Bilo and Ulga Stonebrew man their domain like a pair of wedded warlords. Bilo, red-faced and broad as a cask, mans the counter with thunder in his voice and a mug always nearby. Ulga commands the kitchen with ladles, knives, and the efficiency of a siege general. Together, they serve laughter, tales, and their pride and joy: a fiery stout known only as "Stonewake."

The stout, thick and dark with a surprising embered bite, has drawn drinkers from across Mirthwood and beyond. Brewed in secret downstairs with ingredients guarded closer than family names, it's become the tavern's signature—more potent than mead, smoother than dwarven gold.

But the morning fog brought more than chimney smoke.

It began with a knock.

Not the usual knock of a delivery boy or a hungover bard looking for work. No, this was the stiff, deliberate rhythm of law—or something like it. Bilo opened the door to find a lanky human in a crisp guild jacket, sleeves stiff with waxed starch, a satchel of scrolls slung at his side.

“Master Bilo Stonebrew?” the inspector asked.

“Aye, what of it?”

“I am Denric Vale, licensed representative of the Mirthwood Taverners' Guild. You are hereby served this notice of immediate cease-and-desist in accordance with Guild Regulation Charter 18, Subsection C: ‘Unauthorized and unregistered proprietary brewing distribution within the city walls.’”

Bilo blinked. “Speak straight, lad. Ye just accused me o’ bein’ a thief?”

Ulga appeared behind him, wiping her hands on her apron. “Guild business, is it? What’s the accusation?”

Denric cleared his throat and removed a second scroll. “It claims your Stonewake stout bears identical formulation traits to ‘Kingsbarrow Ember,’ a recipe registered exclusively to the Emberlight Tavern three years ago. You're ordered to cease production and sale until review.”

Ulga snatched the scroll from his hand. “We brewed that fire-born stout ourselves, from scratch and memory, same as my gran taught me. Emberlight can choke on its froth.”

Bilo clenched his fists, but held back the storm. “You tell your guild that if they want to challenge my brew, they can drink it first and see if it don’t burn the lies outta their throats.”

Denric gave a tight, nervous bow. “Take it up with the magistrate, Master Stonebrew. My job’s only to deliver.”

As the inspector departed, a heavy silence settled in the tavern.

“This smells of bribes,” Ulga said. “Rival taverns’d give their left cask to shut us down.”

“Aye,” Bilo growled. “And that Emberlight muck has always wanted our corner of Mirthwood. Can’t outbrew us, so they’ll out-bribe us.”

That night, with the notice pinned behind the bar like a cursed relic, Bilo called in a few trusted patrons. The kind who knew their way around back alleys, paperwork, and city politics.

“We need help,” he said. “If ye’re loyal to the Mole, and still stand by our stout, then we’ve got a job for ye.”

The guild’s claim was forged. Of that, they were sure. Now it was time to prove it.

Objectives soon became clear:

First, the guild paperwork needed a close look—too precise to be true, and likely traced back to a known forger. Second, merchants and tavern-keepers needed questioning. Someone, somewhere, saw a bribe passed, or heard a threat whispered. Third, Emberlight's sudden rise in popularity begged questions—how did they gain access to such a specific recipe?

Thus began the investigation. Not just to clear the Stonebrew name, but to expose corruption beneath the foam and find the real culprits behind the poisoned parchment.

The Mirthwood Taverners' Guild Hall stood like a smug monument in the Merchant's Ward—clean stone, burnished brass plaques, and a wide, double-doored entrance flanked by stone lion statues that looked more decorative than dangerous. Inside, the scent of parchment and pipe ash lingered beneath the bureaucratic hush. Quill scratches and distant stamping echoed like ritualistic murmurs.

The plan to enter the archives varied depending on who in Bilo and Ulga's circle took the lead. Some attempted diplomacy, buttering up the junior clerks with gossip, compliments, or well-placed tankards of sweet stout slipped beneath ledgers. Others opted for shadow—disguises, forged credentials, or late-night infiltration through a rain-slick servant's door near the back alley.

The archives were tucked behind rows of regulation books and trade permits, behind a locked iron gate and overseen by a half-asleep scribe named Jollem, whose glasses made his eyes look like dinner plates. A few kind words and a strategically "misplaced" flask of pear brandy were enough to distract him. Once past the gate, Bilos men discovered what they'd hoped for—and feared.

In a cracked leather folio marked "Emberlight Licensing," they uncovered correspondence written in the cramped, precise hand of Guild Official Rhelgor Sann. Several letters were marked "urgent" and addressed to one Borlag Blacktap, a name familiar to anyone who'd drank watery ale in a soulless tavern. Borlag, a former cooper turned pub baron, owned no fewer than six establishments across Mirthwood, each as flavorless and overpriced as the last. His ambition was no secret—and now it was clear he'd set his sights on erasing competition through corruption.

The letters detailed a bribe: 300 gold and a yearly cut of Emberlight profits in exchange for a fraudulent cease-and-desist order issued against The Vicious Mole. One parchment bore a distinct thumbprint in red wax—Blacktap's crude personal seal: a broken mug surrounded by gold rings.

But before the party could celebrate the find, they were met on the way out by shadows that moved with grim purpose.

In a narrow passage behind the guild hall, a group of figures stepped out from behind crates and corners. Four in total—faces half-hidden beneath bandanas, cudgels and short blades drawn.

“Stonebrew’s pets,” growled the leader, a thick-necked man with a scar across his lip. “We’ve got a message for your dwarf friends.”

Steel glinted in the faint lantern light.

Whether they stood or fled, the Bilos men quickly realized this wasn’t a random mugging. These were hired men—not by the Guild, but by Borlag himself, eager to clean up his tracks before they smeared. As the clash echoed into the dark, the thugs hissed threats:

“Turn back, or next time we break more than noses.”

When the smoke cleared and the bodies—wounded, not dead—lay groaning in the alley, one of the attackers had a crumpled note in his pocket. A payment order. Signed with a false name, but matching the same wax seal.

Proof was building.

Now, armed with documents and bruises, the players returned to the tavern and shared their findings with Bilo and Ulga. The old dwarves didn’t say much—just poured mugs and passed them around.

“We knew it smelled rotten,” Bilo muttered. “But this is mold under the barrel.”

With the documents copied and safely hidden, the next step was subtle but vital: talking to lower-tier guild members. Barkeeps, journeyman brewers, and tavern cleaners who’d never see the gold Borlag hoarded. The players whispered of corruption, showed glimpses of sealed letters, and made promises:

“Stonebrew’s been honest from the start. You want to work for gold or ghosts?”

Doubt took root. Quiet at first. But in Mirthwood, gossip travels faster than messengers—and soon, even the alemaids in the Guild Hall were whispering about red wax, forged ink, and a man who paid too much for silence.

The stink of treachery had settled thick over Mirthwood, but Bilo Stonebrew wasn’t one to bow to foul winds. With forged guild notices exposed and Borlag Blacktap’s scheming brought into the daylight, it was time to turn the tide—not with blades, but with voices, mugs, and a little righteous dwarven spite.

By week’s end, Bilos men—a ragtag group of loyal patrons, ex-employees, and troublemakers with hearts in the right place—were moving across the city like whispers through a drunkard’s dream. They made quiet visits to cellar doors, tapped on kitchen windows, and leaned on ale barrels in backrooms where guild ink didn’t reach. The goal was simple: rally the independents.

In smoky rooms above unregistered inns, behind butcher shops, and in corner taverns with cracked mugs and honest floors, they made their case.

“Bilo and Ulga brew with pride,” one of them said. “Borlag brews with coin. Which one do you want writ in the Mirthwood brewers’ ledger a century from now?”

They talked to barkeeps who worked fifteen-hour days, to old dwarves who remembered when a pint cost copper and not clout. They brought out one of Bilo’s last hidden casks of Stonewake and let its bite do half the talking. More than a few raised a mug in silent agreement, swearing to speak when the time came.

Word reached the Guild. Pressure mounted. And so, under growing public scrutiny, a hearing was called in the Guild Forum Hall—a wide stone chamber with tiered seating and a carved bench where three senior adjudicators would preside.

It was standing room only.

Bilo and Ulga stood near the front, dressed not in finery but in their daily aprons, stained with broth and hops. Borlag Blacktap entered flanked by two bodyguards, greasy mustache curled into a permanent smirk, his tabard too clean for someone who claimed to serve ale.

One by one, neutral taverners were called to speak. Some wavered—but others, warmed by loyalty or stirred by Bilo’s men, rose in support.

“I've tasted both brews,” said old Dame Wrenla from The Thirsty Hammer. “Stonewake’s got soul. Emberlight’s got preservatives.”

Next came the moment of revelation. One of Bilo’s men, a sharp-eyed girl with city papers in her hands, unrolled the letters from the Guild archives. The wax seal glistened red beneath the sun-slitted window. Gasps and murmurs filled the chamber. A clerk stammered in denial. An adjudicator raised a brow.

And then, stepping forward like a statue coming to life, came Master Harven Deepdraft, the oldest brewmaster in Mirthwood. Hair like iron shavings, voice like crushed barley, he carried a small flask in one hand and a thick recipe scroll in the other.

“I taught Ulga Stonebrew’s grandmother,” he said. “Their recipe is old mountain craft. Passed through steam and fire. Borlag’s Emberlight swill wasn’t even dreamed of when Ulga was still butchering root vegetables in her family’s forge-house.”

He poured a dram into three cups and let the panel taste the truth for themselves.

The room buzzed. Borlag sputtered. One adjudicator leaned forward. “And you swear this recipe pre-dates the Emberlight license?”

Harven sniffed. “I’d swear it on Moradin’s beard.”

But while all this stirred within the great hall, something altogether less dignified unfolded across town.

At midnight, while his men worked the crowd and Ulga rested her aching feet, Bilo slipped out of The Vicious Mole, wrapped in a long cloak that barely concealed his bulk. With him: a small satchel, a strong sense of vengeance, and a belly full of ale.

He circled the alleyways until he reached Emberlight Tavern. Its windows glowed faint and sour. He crept around back where the cellar hatch lay latched.

Ten minutes and one picklock later, Bilo descended into the dark. He knew the scent of hops, but here the air was sterile—factory-brewed swill pretending at tradition.

He found the largest barrel—marked for "Borlag's Best"—and with a grunt, climbed the side.

"Here's yer secret ingredient," he muttered.

He squatted.

By the time he returned to The Vicious Mole, dawn was creeping over Mirthwood and the guild hearing was nearing its close.

Whether or not the law would swing in his favor, Bilo was certain of one thing:

Borlag's next batch would taste... unforgettable.

The final hearing of the Mirthwood Taverners' Guild Tribunal convened beneath storm-thick clouds. Though the wind howled through the city's gables, the Forum Hall was packed, warm, and bristling with tension. Taverners, cityfolk, and curious onlookers filled the benches. Rumors had swelled like over-yeasted bread—about forgeries, bribes, poisoned pints, and dwarven revenge. Everyone came to see if truth would out—or if gold would drown it.

The three Guild Masters sat high upon their carved dais, flanked by clerks and ink-stained assistants. Scrolls of testimony lay stacked beside cups of water and untouched tankards of ale. Borlag Blacktap stood to the right, rings gleaming, cloak pressed, eyes cold with arrogance. Across the chamber, Bilo and Ulga stood shoulder to shoulder, arms folded across their aprons, with Bilo's men scattered through the room, some with bandages still fresh from alley scuffles.

A clerk banged the gavel.

"Today's matter: The Vicious Mole versus Emberlight Tavern, on charges of unauthorized recipe distribution, forgery of Guild licenses, and corruption within Guild ranks."

The evidence was presented in full. The letters. The seal. The testimony of Brewmaster Harven. Merchant accounts. Even the bruised thug with a coin pouch bearing Borlag's crest. One by one, neutral tavern owners gave their accounts—some quiet, others loud, but nearly all in support of the Stonebrews.

Ulga's voice, when she spoke, cut through the murmurs like a cleaver.

“We’ve bled for our brew. We don’t serve it for crowns and clout, but for kin and craft. If that ain’t worth more than Borlag’s bluster, then I’ll boil my apron and drink the broth.”

The Guild Masters conferred in hushed tones. Their faces grew grim. The judgment neared.

And that’s when the doors burst open by a dozen Borlags hired swords in gleaming mail. Borlag then pointed toward Bilo.

“This tribunal is a farce!” he shouted. “You lot want to judge? Let’s settle this the old way! Steel and bone! My men’ll prove who’s fit to own the taps in this city!”

The room erupted in chaos—tables upturned, spectators diving for cover. One of Bilo’s men hurled a tankard at the nearest mercenary, and within moments, blades were drawn.

Bilo ducked behind a pillar, drew a short-handled war hammer from beneath his cloak, and roared, “Ye brought a sword to a brew-fight, Borlag!”

Ulga, with ladle in one hand and meat cleaver in the other, tackled one of the mercs like a charging boar. Chairs flew. Mugs scattered. Someone shouted, “Not the stained glass!” just before it shattered.

The fight was quick but brutal. Bilo’s men held their own, aided by enraged taverners and a few unexpected barmaids with frying pans. Borlag, bloodied and breathless, was finally subdued by Berrik the old cleric and two guards who’d seen enough.

When order returned and the mercenaries were dragged out in chains, the Guild Masters rose together.

“This tribunal finds Borlag Blacktap guilty of bribery, falsification of guild documentation, incitement of violence, and the defamation of a fellow tavern,” the lead Master announced.

“Effective immediately, Borlag is expelled from the Guild. Emberlight Tavern’s charter is suspended. The Vicious Mole retains full rights to its Stonewake stout.”

Applause thundered through the chamber. Some cheered. Others wept.

But the final blow didn’t come from the tribunal.

Later that week, word spread like spilled ale: patrons at Emberlight Tavern had fallen violently ill—wretching, sweating, and fleeing to privies with horror in their eyes. The taste of Borlag’s latest brew was described as “worse than rotting skunk cabbage boiled in sewage.” Rumors bloomed—tales of sabotage, of a curse, of ingredients unholy and human in origin.

City health clerics arrived. The tavern emptied. And the once-gilded sign of Emberlight was quietly taken down one rainy morning.

The Vicious Mole, meanwhile, was never busier. Patrons raised their mugs to the Stonebrews, drank deeply of Stonewake stout, and roared with laughter when Bilo whispered the truth behind the downfall:

“Let’s just say... what went in, came out.”

And Ulga only shook her head, muttering, “Next time, aim for his ledger.”

Tharion Elaren

The door to The Vicious Mole creaked open with the weight of distant storms behind it. A gust of evening air swept through the tavern, stirring the firelight and causing a few regulars to glance up from their dice and drink. In the doorway stood a tall figure, cloaked in forest-hued green and shadow, the hem of his long coat soaked in mud and his silver hair streaked with dried blood. The elf’s armor bore gouges, his boots were cracked, and his eyes—cool as river stone—searched the room with a hunter’s patience.

Bilo looked up from behind the counter, wiping a mug with a rag that had seen better years. He squinted. “You look like a poem someone wrote in the middle of a war and never finished.”

The elf stepped inside slowly, each movement like a bowstring held taut. He lowered his hood and nodded toward Bilo.

“Name’s Tharion Elaren,” he said in a voice that might once have sung in courts, now ground down to gravel. “I’ve walked far. I need drink, and fire.”

“Well,” Bilo said, pulling out a clean mug, “we’ve got both in abundance, and a stew that might just give your soul a reason to come back to your body.”

Tharion sat at the bar, and the weight in his limbs betrayed exhaustion beyond simple travel. Ulga appeared briefly from the kitchen window and gave Bilo a look, the one that said, “Feed him properly or I’ll skin you.”

Bilo poured a full tankard of Stonewake stout and slid it across. “Here. Strong enough to knock the bark off a treant.”

Tharion took a long, grateful sip. For a moment, the tightness in his face eased.

“I was once First Blade of Lirae’thalas,” he began, his voice steadying. “Our king, Valmorien, ruled with the grace of centuries. A scholar, a warrior, a steward of the forest. The Verdant Crown gave him vision beyond this age—until the whispering began.”

“Whisperin’?” Bilo said, arching a brow and pouring himself a companion drink.

“The king changed,” Tharion continued. “He ordered the uprooting of the Great Eldergrove, sacred roots that have never known sunlight. He passed decrees soaked in cruelty—exiling druids, burning groves, sealing the Spirit Wells. We thought it grief at first. He had lost his queen not long before. But then…”

He paused, his hand trembling slightly on the mug.

“Then he summoned us to the Hollow Throne and spoke in a voice like wet stone. Eyes black as a starless pit. He was no longer Valmorien. Something from below—something ancient—had reached through root and rot and taken the crown from within.”

Bilo leaned forward, resting thick arms on the bar. “I’ve heard tales of madness takin’ kings. Heard of cursed heirlooms and shadow magic. But tree spirits bein’ overthrown? That’s new bark to me.”

Tharion’s expression didn’t change, but he met Bilo’s eyes.

“It now wears Valmorien’s face. I left because I still carry truth. And I need help.”

From the back room, one of Bilo’s men quietly leaned in, sensing the shift in the air. The tavern’s usual clamor dulled to murmurs, as though even the fire wished to hear more.

Bilo leaned back, took a slow pull from his ale, then smacked the mug to the counter with finality.

“Alright lad,” he said, cracking a grin. “Now you’ve got my ears and half my keg. Go on.”

The fire in The Vicious Mole had burned low, casting deep orange light across the grain of the tables and the faces gathered quietly around the bar. Tharion’s voice held them, steady

and grave, like a slow drumbeat in a war camp. Even Bilo, normally quick to crack a joke or refill a mug mid-sentence, stood still, the rag in his hand forgotten.

“The madness began when they found the vault,” Tharion said. “It was uncovered beneath the royal grove after a lightning strike split the oldest eldertree to the root. What lay beneath had no name in our histories. Stonework older than time, runes etched in languages none could read—sunk deep into the earth like a wound waiting to fester.”

He paused, sipping from his stout.

“The vault pulsed,” he continued, “not with magic, but with something older, wetter. It bled a light that no lantern casts—green and slow, like sick moonlight through moss. And near it… the world changed. Birds grew third eyes. Wolves sprouted fungus from their jaws. One stag was found with limbs tangled like roots and mushrooms growing from its eye sockets, still alive. The druids warned us: the forest was being rewritten.”

“By what?” someone muttered from a nearby table.

Tharion’s gaze was distant. “By the thing below.”

He went on. “King Valmorien forbid further study. He destroyed the reports. Executed the scholars who drew the vault’s glyphs. He banned the druids who refused to bow. Then… he began to sacrifice. Spirits of the glade. Dryads, greenwalkers, even the elder treants. Taken at night, bound in ironroot vines, burned or buried beneath the royal roots. All in the name of ‘The Rooted One.’”

“The Rooted One,” Bilo repeated slowly, brow furrowed. “Sounds like a cabbage god with a bone to pick.”

Tharion allowed the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth. “I thought him mad too. Until I led the descent.”

He turned his mug slowly. “A dozen of us. My brothers-in-arms, one druid elder, and a spirit guide from the riverfolk. We used old tunnels beneath the sanctuary, cloaked in silence. We entered the vault. The air was warm, damp, and alive. Thorned roots pulsed along the walls, like arteries. The floor squelched beneath our boots. Glowing mycelium lit the path, but dimly—and the light moved, as though it watched us. Shadows whispered. Not words, but… impulses. Like fear in the shape of a sound.”

A log in the hearth cracked loudly, and everyone jumped slightly. Bilo, grinning now, leaned in with a raised brow.

“Sacrifices and mushrooms, eh? Tell me this doesn’t end with yer king growin’ a beard of spores.”

Tharion didn’t smile this time.

“I saw it, Bilo. His face—half bark, half fungus. He stood beneath the vault’s heart like a statue grafted to the soil. His eyes were hollow. His breath spored the air. He is no longer the king I served.”

Silence fell again.

Ulga stepped out from the kitchen, wiping her hands. “I knew we were outta thyme,” she muttered, “but this is a whole different kind of rot.”

Tharion raised his mug. “I left because I swore an oath to protect my people, not to serve a parasite pretending to be king.”

Bilo poured him another stout.

“And now, lad,” he said, sliding the mug across, “I’m guessin’ you’re here not just to tell tales, but to see who’ll walk back into that mushroom pit with you.”

The tavern was quieter now. Even the usual creak of the rafters seemed to hush in reverence or fear. The tale had taken root in every ear, curling like ivy into the imagination of each soul present. Tharion’s voice remained steady, but his fingers trembled ever so slightly as they traced the rim of his mug. He did not look up as he continued.

“In the heart of the vault, beneath the roots of a petrified world-tree, we found it—a throne grown from stone and bark, knotted with veins of glowing fungus. And seated in the hollow beneath its roots was a worm.”

He paused, allowing the image to settle.

“A massive, glistening thing the color of rot and old wine. Its flesh shimmered with wet scales and patches of lichen, its maw like a tunnel filled with tongues. But it never spoke aloud. Its voice came from within us.”

Several patrons shifted uncomfortably. Bilo scowled and scratched his beard.

“It called itself Apholarax,” Tharion said. “An ancient being. A parasite-wyrm born before elves kept ink or kings. It was once worshipped by a forgotten forest cult—those who sought harmony not through balance, but through domination. They fused druidic rites with parasitic control, infecting minds to maintain order. The cult was buried long ago... but the root still lived. Waiting.”

Tharion’s eyes grew distant. “It called Valmorien ‘Seed-Host.’ Said he was chosen. It had reached up through dreams and grief, whispering promises of eternal bloom and perfect rule. He didn’t resist. He welcomed it.”

He sipped again, as if trying to wash away the memory.

“We fought to reach the throne. Illusions turned friends into enemies. We breathed spore clouds that bent our memories, turned us against ourselves. One of my men walked into a

root-wall thinking it was a glade. Another was laughing as tendrils bloomed from his mouth. Half of us were lost before we ever saw the beast."

Tharion's jaw clenched.

"When I reached the throne, I saw the king—no, the thing that wore his skin. Bark split along his limbs where fungus pushed through. His crown had fused into his skull. He was… becoming."

Bilo leaned in, the warmth gone from his usual grin. "And?"

"I struck. Sunsteel blade, gifted by the River Shrine, still humming with prayer. It burned the worm's flank—white fire flared from the wound. It screamed through every thought in my head, like knives made of voices. It retreated, slithering down into the roots. Not dead. Not banished. Just... waiting."

Tharion finally looked at Bilo, his gaze cold and weighted.

"I failed to kill it. But I slowed its growth. I bought time."

Bilo's face darkened. He stepped around the counter and planted his arms on the bar, leaning forward.

"So you didn't kill it, elf," he said, narrowing his eyes. "You let it squirm away?"

A long pause.

"I couldn't finish it," Tharion admitted. "Not alone. But I didn't come to drink and mourn. I came to gather fire."

Bilo's expression was unreadable for a long moment.

Then he grabbed a fresh mug, filled it, and slid it toward Tharion with enough force to rattle the wood.

"Well then," he grunted, "I hope you like your vengeance foamy. Because if we're goin' worm-huntin' in the woods, I'll need to pack more than just stew."

The fire had long since settled into embers, casting low crimson light through the smoky haze that hung in The Vicious Mole. Patrons listened with the stillness of tombstones, mugs untouched, games forgotten. Even Ulga stood in the kitchen doorway, arms folded tight, her usual kitchen mutterings hushed by the weight of the tale.

Tharion lowered his head slightly, voice raw with memory.

"I could not slay Apholarax. Not then. Not with half my blades lost, not with the king already bound in mycelial flesh. So I did the only thing I could."

He reached beneath his cloak and drew forth a bundle wrapped in dark velvet. He unwrapped it just enough to show the curve of golden vinework, inset with leaf-shaped emeralds. The Verdant Crown, its magic now dulled, hummed faintly with ancient sorrow.

“I tore it from his brow and fled. The crown was the tether—the beacon through which the beast fed. Without it, Apholarax’s voice faltered. Its grip weakened. But so too did the kingdom. The royal line cracked like frost-bitten bark. Druids scattered. Cities bloomed rot beneath their stone. Roots twisted the roads. The heart of Lirae’thalas pulses now with spore and shadow.”

He wrapped the crown again and tucked it away like a memory too dangerous to leave exposed.

“They call me traitor. Kinslayer. The Blight-Bringer. But I still carry the truth, and the wound that festers behind it.”

Bilo exhaled heavily, scratching the back of his head. “So now you wander the realms, wearin’ a stolen crown and lookin’ for a ghost’s instruction manual? Sounds about right for elf business.”

Tharion gave a half-smile, tired but real. “Not just any lore. I believe a fragment of the ancient cult’s scripture survived. One of their original texts. It might hold a rite—one to purge Apholarax entirely. If it exists, it’s either buried in the deep dwarven vaults or scattered in the songs and mutterings of old drinking halls.”

He gestured around the tavern, as if to say, *this one included*.

“Some of the old miner’s dirges,” he added, “speak of a ‘Worm That Roots Heaven,’ and a flame that could burn even gods of rot.”

Bilo gave a wheezing laugh and poured another drink.

“You think we keep sacred scrolls in the ale barrels?” he chuckled. “We don’t even keep the clean mugs in the right place. But aye, I’ve heard a verse or two sung half-drunk at closing time. Miners’ve got strange tales when they’re three ales deep—stuff about things in the deep stone that breathe wrong and feed on dreams.”

Then Tharion placed something on the bar.

A coin—not gold, nor copper. It pulsed faintly with a sickly green glow, the metal smooth and cold as bone. Carved into its face was a writhing root motif surrounding a single closed eye. And it stank, subtly but unmistakably, of soil left too long unturned.

“I pulled it from a dead dwarf’s tongue,” Tharion said. “He was chained in a fungal cradle, somewhere beneath the ruins of Darnak-Vorr. This was lodged deep in his mouth. Not a coin… a key, perhaps.”

Bilo’s smile faded. His gaze dropped to the counter, then back to the coin.

“Well...,” he muttered.

Behind them, Ulga turned slowly back into the kitchen and lit a second hearth fire.

The warmth drained from Bilo’s face like ale from a cracked cask. He stared at the coin as if it might bite him, the glow of its sickly green surface casting faint, wriggling shadows across the bar. Slowly, he reached out and turned it over with a thick, trembling finger.

The coiled worm. The taproot. The eye.

He let out a breath like a man who’d swallowed ash.

“That mark,” he said, voice low, “that’s from the Deep Root Society. A cult older than any tavern tale, whispered in the old mine-shafts when the stone felt too quiet. My da used to tell me stories when I was a beardling. Thought they were drunken miner’s tales—warnings to keep us from diggin’ where veins went dry.”

He shook his head, his jovial mask gone.

“He told me once… there was a site deep beneath the mountain, under the oldest tunnels. They dug too far, into stone that bled. Men started hearin’ voices. Singing roots. One crew sealed it—bound the shaft with iron runes and an oath. ‘Let none awaken the sleeper under stone,’ they carved. And then they collapsed the passage. Buried it like a corpse. He said they burned the maps after.”

Bilo looked at Tharion now with hard, bloodshot eyes.

“Turns out, my da wasn’t tellin’ stories. He was leavin’ a warning.”

Outside, the wind whispered low through the streets of Mirthwood, brushing against shutters and doorframes like a cautious traveler. Inside the Vicious Mole, the hearths crackled anew, casting long, gentle shadows over stone and wood. The kitchen clattered with familiar rhythm again—Ulga’s spoon striking iron, Thora humming a tune that didn’t yet have words.

Tharion sat still at the bar, his hands clasped around a fresh mug. He stared down into the dark ale like it might hold answers or absolution. Behind him, the low murmurs of evening regulars had returned—dice rattling, a flute warming up by the hearth, laughter unsure but real.

Bilo set the coin down and pushed it away gently, as if distance might dull its voice. Then he pulled out a cloth, wiped the bar with slow circles, and nodded at Tharion.

“We don’t need to follow it, you know,” he said, voice returning to its usual gravelly calm. “Not every road’s worth the feet it takes.”

Tharion didn’t answer right away. When he did, it was quiet. “But some roads follow you.”

Bilo grunted. “Aye. And some get lost in ale, stew, and a warm chair until they remember they’re still just roads.”

The bar door creaked open. A traveler stepped in, damp cloak drawn tight, glancing about with that look of someone unsure if they'd found a haven or a mistake.

Bilo gave the man a once-over, then jerked his thumb at the nearest table. “Sit yerself. First drink’s warm. Second one’ll decide if you stay.”

He caught Ulga’s eye through the kitchen arch. She raised a ladle and smiled.

The tavern began to breathe again.

Whatever had followed Tharion, whatever stirred beneath forgotten stone or whispered through the cracks of old dreams—those things could wait. For now, the stew needed stirring, the ale needed pouring, and the Vicious Mole had mouths to feed.

Because when the earth groans and myths crack open in the deep, someone still needs to light the fire.

And someone always needs a drink.

The morning haze had barely lifted when Tharion departed. He left with a firm nod, the green-glowing coin wrapped tightly in a cloth pouch and tied to his belt. Bilo watched him vanish into the mist beyond the Mirthwood gate, then turned back to the Mole’s quiet, half-swept floor.

It wasn’t quiet for long.

The tavern doors flew open, and six miners stumbled in with boots caked in dust and faces streaked with soot. Their tunics were torn, their eyes wild with the fire of recent fortune, and one of them still wore a helmet with a candle burned halfway down.

“Bilo!” the lead miner shouted. “Ale! A round for us all! We found it!”

Bilo looked up from behind the bar. “Found what, Tarl? Your manners? You left those in a bottle six years ago.”

Tarl grinned, missing two teeth. “A silver vein, Bilo! Deep and fat and shiny like a goddess’s smile. Struck it two days ago, and it’s still running.”

The other miners whooped and clapped each other on the back, falling into chairs and shouting over each other.

“Deepest I ever dug!”

“Hit the pick once and the whole wall sparkled!”

“Bigger than the West Bend vein, I swear by my mother’s whiskers!”

Bilo poured mugs without asking. “Silver’s fine, boys, but if you spend it before it’s weighed, you’ll end up drunk and hollow.”

A tall miner named Grusk slammed his mug down. “I say we sell our claim now, split the profits and get out while it’s still silver, not slag!”

A shorter man across the table, Brenn, sneered. “You’d sell out before we’ve seen a full barrow? You gutless goat.”

Another miner stood. “He’s right. Brenn’s been hoardin’ picks and claim signs. Saw him markin’ the seam deeper than agreed!”

“I was marking the damn edge!”

“Liar!”

The room snapped like a brittle rope.

Grusk lunged over the table and tackled Brenn, knocking mugs and stew bowls flying. Two others joined in, chairs scraping and fists flying. One man smashed a pitcher into another’s back; a boot flew up and struck a candle sconce clean off the wall. Dice scattered, a bench cracked in half, and someone yelled, “Not the soup, dammit!”

Bilo roared behind the bar.

He vaulted over with surprising speed for a dwarf of his girth, hammer raised—not his warhammer, but the smaller ironwood one he used for breaking kegs.

WHAM.

The first miner dropped like a sack of gravel, eyes spinning.

WHUMP.

The second didn’t even get to swing before Bilo knocked him into the fireplace grate.

A third tried to run and caught the hammer across the knees. He went down with a howl.

“ENOUGH!” Bilo bellowed. “I clean blood off flagstones today, I charge double for stew tomorrow!”

One last miner raised a chair, unsure whether to fight or flee—then Ulga emerged from the kitchen, ladle in hand, apron bloody from chopping meat.

She didn’t say a word.

She just marched up and *cracked* the iron ladle across the back of his skull. The man let out a surprised squeak and folded to the floor with a thud.

There was silence—broken only by the distant sound of a tavern door swinging open again as a tiny figure darted out into the street.

“That was Cobbin,” Bilo muttered. “He’s runnin’ to the guardhouse.”

Sure enough, not ten minutes later, two city guards stomped in—helmets lopsided, cudgels at their belts, faces unimpressed.

“What’s this about a tavern riot?”

“Misunderstanding,” Bilo said, wiping blood from his knuckles with a dishcloth. “Just some lads celebratin’ a lucky dig. Got excited. Took a nap mid-toast.”

The guards eyed the unconscious men groaning on the floor.

Ulga stepped forward. “They’re workin’ off the damage.”

An hour later, five miners were on their knees scrubbing ale-stained flagstones, bruised and humbler. Ulga watched like a hawk, still holding the ladle. Bilo leaned against the bar, satisfied.

When the work was done and the guards gone, Tarl approached, rubbing the side of his jaw.

“Sorry for the mess, Bilo. Wasn’t supposed to go like that. We’re just… y’know, excited. We’ll make it right.”

From a cloth pouch at his belt, he pulled out ten small, rough-cut silver nuggets, still dusted with mine grit.

“Take these. They’re clean. Worth twenty gold, least.”

Bilo accepted them without a word, weighing one in his hand, then placing them under the bar with a quiet clink.

“You break anything else,” he said, “you’re payin’ in limbs.”

Tarl grinned. “Deal.”

As the miners limped out into the fading light, Ulga finally sat down.

“Richer than they were this morning,” she muttered.

Bilo nodded, watching the cleaned floor sparkle faintly beneath the lanterns.

“So’s the Mole.”

Ilondra

The Vicious Mole was quiet that afternoon. Bilo stood behind the counter, polishing a mug that was already clean, and Thora dozed in a chair near the hearth, a book slipping from her lap. Outside, rain whispered against the shutters like a half-forgotten tune.

The door opened with barely a creak. A tall, blonde figure stepped through, robes damp at the hem, the scent of earth and heather trailing behind her like memory. She was elven—no

doubt in her height, in the way she moved like a breeze unnoticed until it stirred the flame. A lute was slung across her back, and a flute poked out from a worn satchel stitched with leaves and seed patterns. Her fingers, calloused and strong, belied more than just music—they spoke of farm labor, early mornings, and stone bread ovens.

Bilo looked up and gave a nod. “Welcome to the Mole. Rain’s not lettin’ up, but the fire’s on and the tea’s hot.”

The elf gave a soft smile and stepped inside, rain pattering off her cloak as she unfastened it. “I’m Ilondra,” she said. “Of Willow Vale. Bard when the moon permits. Farmhand when the sun insists. I’d trade coin for a room and a warm drink.”

“You’ve got both,” Bilo replied. “We’ve hot water on, but no fancy teas unless you brought your own.”

“I did,” she said, gently placing a small satchel on the bar. “Dried lindenflower, elderleaf, and a hint of fennel. It calms the bones and sharpens the voice.”

Bilo whistled softly, took the bundle, and disappeared behind the curtain into the kitchen. When he returned, the steam rose fragrant and golden from a clay mug. Ilondra took it with both hands, breathed it in, and sighed.

Not long after, she unslung her flute and stepped near the hearth. Thora stirred, blinked, and smiled as the elf raised the instrument to her lips.

The tune was soft, fluid—a stream weaving between stones, high branches whispering under morning light. And then her voice followed, higher than the flame, smoother than wine.

Through leaves the morning robin goes
Where willow's breath and river flows
The fawn drinks slow, the fox runs free
In dappled hush beneath the tree

The wind it speaks in secret ways
Through silver dew and blooming bays
And hearts that ache, and minds that roam
Find song in roots and call it home

The tavern was still, the fire snapping softly beneath her final note. For a long moment, even Bilo didn't speak.

Then he raised a fresh mug and slid it toward her. "Any song that good deserves at least a drink. On the house. What brings a bard from the hillbrush down to the stone streets of Mirthwood?"

Ilondra took the mug, cupping it between her hands again. Her eyes held warmth, but also the long reach of memory.

"I come from Willow Vale," she said. "A green fold between the hills where the rivers weave like braids through the willows. Quiet place. We harvest elderberry, oat, wild wheat. Tend goats, mostly. Wake to birds and apple-fattened deer."

She smiled, though it was tinged with something else.

"It was a quiet life," she said. "But not without troubles. Nature gives, aye. But sometimes... she tests us too."

Bilo leaned forward, brow creasing slightly. "What kind of test, Ilondra?"

She looked down into her tea. The steam had faded, but her voice remained warm.

Her eyes fixed on the flicker of the hearth, her voice softer now, shaped by memory as much as breath.

"It started with one week," she said. "Just a long summer storm, we thought. The kind that soaks your boots and sends the goats under the eaves. But the clouds stayed. The wind stopped turning. And the rain... it just kept coming."

She cupped her mug and closed her eyes. "Five weeks. Thunder near every night. The streams swelled till they ran black with soil. The valley paths vanished. Fields turned to muck. We'd seeded barley and elderflower late that year—the floods took all of it."

Bilo let out a long grunt. "Hells, I've lost half a shipment to a broken barrel once. Beer soaked the cellar for three days. Could smell the rot in the rafters. But five weeks of rain..."

Ilondra smiled faintly. “We lost more than crops. The granary at the village’s heart grew mold on the inside stones. Even the old store jars—the ones sealed with beeswax—couldn’t keep it out. Bread went soft before you cut it. Roots turned sour. Hunger settled over us like a fog you couldn’t clear.”

She took a sip of her tea, then reached into her satchel and pulled out a smooth wooden carving shaped like a finch. She turned it over in her palm as she spoke.

“The elders argued. Some said wait. Others said leave. But no one could *go*—the roads were just mud and broken stones. We tried to keep hope alive. I played songs every evening, under the long-eaved porch of the mead hall. Not laments. Never dirges. I sang of green leaves returning, of spring waiting at the edge of every downpour. Of sunlight we hadn’t seen in days but remembered in our bones.”

Thora, listening now beside the fire, wiped at her eye without shame.

Ilondra continued. “Still, even music thins when bellies hollow. We tried to send word to the hill-road traders, but no caravan dared the washed bridges. The village began to quiet—not in peace, but in loss.”

She looked to Bilo, her voice steady.

“So I left. Took what dry bread I could, herbs from my drying shelves, this flute... and this,” she tapped the lute lightly, its wood polished by seasons of callused fingers. “I carried more than a sack,” she said. “I carried my people’s hearts.”

Bilo leaned against the bar, jaw set. “And brought them here, to a place full of noise, ale, and dice.”

She smiled. “Even moss grows on stone, given song and rain.”

The fire crackled as she leaned back, and the finch carving rested on the counter between them.

Outside, the last drops of that evening’s rain tapped the tavern roof in slow retreat.

Ilondra warmed her hands on her mug, the edge of her shawl catching the firelight as she leaned forward a little.

“I walked from willow-shaded streams to cobbled paths, over hills I didn’t know the names of. Some days I only had nettle tea and damp bread, but my feet kept moving. I offered stories and song wherever I stopped. Didn’t matter if it was a hayloft or a stone square.”

She smiled at the memory. “I slept in barns more nights than I can count. Sang in markets while the fishmongers shouted over me. Told tales to children for bowls of lentils. And once—this was near Greymerrow—I sang for a mercenary company with muddy boots and steel eyes.”

Bilo raised a brow. “Don’t tell me they cried.”

“Not quite,” Ilondra said, chuckling. “But their captain—big man, voice like thunder—handed me a sack of flour and said I sang better than his dead grandmother’s ghost. That’s about the highest praise I could ask.”

Thora grinned from near the fire. “You ever get run out of a village for bad tuning?”

Ilondra laughed. “Worse. Once, near a hamlet called Sedgefield, I was invited to a wedding—asked to play a ceremonial song at the blessing. I thought I knew the tune... turns out, I played a sacred dirge. The bride’s mother fainted.”

Bilo barked a laugh. “You ruin the wedding?”

“Almost,” Ilondra said, eyes dancing. “But I spun it into a drinking song before the chorus ended. Had the crowd dancing before the priest finished cursing me.”

Bilo shook his head, wiping a tear of laughter with the side of his thumb. “That’s talent—or sheer luck.”

Ilondra’s tone softened. “There was luck, aye. And kindness, more than I’d expected. An old halfling woman in Yarrowbend—baker, smelled like honey and smoke—she gave me a week’s bread and a hand-drawn map of the lowland routes. Said I reminded her of her daughter.”

She paused. “And once, just outside a tollhouse near Thorncross, a child with a wild mess of hair came up to me, no older than six. Gave me a carved wooden comb. Said it was for luck, ‘cause her da always combed his beard before going to war.”

Ulga, passing by with a tray of stew bowls, paused. “You still have it?”

Ilondra reached into her satchel and pulled it free—a small, simple comb, worn smooth by time and travel. She held it in her palm.

“I do. It reminds me of what I carried. Not just songs. Not just hunger. But hope.”

She looked around at the warm glow of the tavern, at the mugs, the stew, the soft clatter of spoons and laughter.

“I learned that stories don’t just entertain,” she said. “They build bridges—even between those who’ve never met. People listened. And they gave.”

Bilo nodded slowly, the smile fading into something more thoughtful. “That’s worth more than gold, that is. A tale well told that fills a belly.”

Ilondra glanced toward the hearth. “And now, maybe, this is the place where a few more bridges get built.”

Bilo lifted his mug. “Then here’s to bridges, lass. And to flour from mercenaries.”

Ilondra’s voice carried the calm of someone who had once stood on the edge of despair and found her way back.

“It was autumn when I returned,” she said. “Leaves already gold, the hills soft with morning fog. The cart creaked with every step, heavy with sacks of grain, spades, salted meat, seed satchels, even a spare paddle for our broken waterwheel. I’d traded songs for each and every one.”

Bilo leaned forward, arms folded, his mug forgotten for once.

“When I rounded the bend into the vale, they were there—waiting. The children, the elders, goats and all. They cheered, some cried. Even old Marrick, who once said music was ‘a waste of wind.’”

Thora gave a quiet laugh.

Ilondra smiled, lost in the warmth of that memory. “The children… they sang. My songs. Ones I made on muddy roads and moonless nights. Ballads of grain and sky and fireflies. They remembered.”

She looked down for a moment, then continued. “We replanted. Every hand helped. I turned earth with the same arms that once strummed strings. We rebuilt the small bridge that washed out during the storm. Set a new gatestone by the mill. And on the last day of frost, we dug a deep hole on the hill above the vale.”

Bilo’s brows lifted. “The tree?”

Ilondra nodded. “A willow. Young and strong. We planted it together. A symbol, they said. Of what we lost, and what we made again.”

The tavern was quiet. The fire crackled low. Bilo took up a mug and began to polish it slowly, though his eyes never left her.

“A bard and a farmer,” he murmured. “I’ll drink to that.”

Ilondra looked at him gently. “We harvest what we sow, Bilo. And I sow songs. Wherever I go.”

She reached back and drew her lute into her lap. Her fingers curled over the strings, tuning without thought, each note warm and sure.

“May I play one for your hearth?”

Bilo gestured toward the fire with a broad hand. “That hearth’s seen plenty. But it ain’t ever said no to a good song.”

Ilondra’s fingers swept gently across the strings of her lute, and the tavern hushed like the world settling after a long storm. The fire dimmed to a golden pulse, casting soft halos around mugs and worn boots. Her voice rose, clear and quiet at first, threading through the air like a winding stream.

She sang of rains that wouldn't end, of fields turned to soup, and the sound of finches gone silent. Of boots wet for weeks, of elders squabbling and children going hungry. But then came verses of firelight shared with strangers, of grain given for songs, of bread warm from unseen hands.

She sang of kindness unexpected, of a wooden comb gifted for luck, of markets and meadows, laughter in far towns, and the long road home. And at last, she sang of Willow Vale—the orchard blooming once more, the bridge rebuilt, and a young willow tree standing tall, catching morning mist in its leaves like memory returned.

By the second verse, a few dwarves near the hearth began to hum along, their low tones weaving under hers. Thora clutched a kerchief in one hand. Even Mildok, busy drying mugs, had stopped mid-wipe.

Bilo leaned on the bar, arms crossed on the counter. His eyes welled but stayed hidden behind his thick brows and bramble-thatch beard. As the last note hung in the air, he reached for his mug and downed a dark ale in one long pull, setting the tankard down with a thud.

"You've earned your room tonight," he said gruffly. "And your next dozen drinks besides."

Ilondra offered a small bow from her stool. "Willow Vale is green again," she said. "And wherever I walk, I carry it with me."

The tavern broke into applause—some loud, others soft, but all sincere. Coins clinked onto the counter, not demanded, just offered. One younger patron approached, asking if she might teach him the tune.

She smiled, her hands already forming the chords again. "Of course," she said. "Songs are meant to be shared. That's how they grow."

And grow they did.

The night spilled into song and stories, the kind only ale and fire can summon. Feet stomped. Thora danced with a flushed-faced farmer. Ulga sang harmony on the refrain. Even old Valar the dwarf warrior tried to clap in rhythm—poorly, but with heart.

As mugs were raised and plates scraped clean, Bilo stepped up onto the edge of the hearth and lifted his tankard high.

"To Ilondra," he called. "May your songs sow joy—and your fields stay dry!"

The tavern roared in return, mugs raised high.

And the fire, fed by story and song, burned warm long into the night.

The next day, as the sun slipped golden fingers through the mist-hung streets of Mirthwood, Ilondra came down the stairs with her lute slung over her shoulder and a quiet smile on her face. Bilo stood at the counter, drying mugs that didn't need drying, but doing it with care all the same.

“Well then,” he said, without looking up. “You gonna play that thing again today, or just keep wearin’ it like a badge?”

Ilondra raised an eyebrow. “Depends. Am I getting paid for it this time?”

Ulga passed through from the kitchen and set a fresh loaf of barley bread on the counter. “You are, lass. Every night you sing, that fire burns a little warmer and folk drink a little deeper. Bilo’s offered coin, I’ve offered a room. It’s yours if you want it—top of the stairs, third on the left. Small, but dry, and the window’s got a view of the chimney.”

Ilondra gave a graceful bow. “I’d be honored.”

So it was that she stayed. Each day she played her lute by the fire, her voice threading between tankards and tapping boots. The regulars learned the choruses, the newcomers left with songs in their heads, and the Vicious Mole began to be known for its music as much as its ale.

Igol

It was a week later, just after dusk, when a man pushed open the tavern door with a hand that looked like it had been broken twice and set wrong. He was tall, broad-shouldered, cloaked in a weather-beaten mantle with patches of iron-studded leather beneath. A sword hung at his side, and his face was all angles and old bruises.

He made no fuss. Just stepped in, took in the room with hard eyes, and grunted toward the bar.

“Ale,” he said.

Bilo didn’t blink. “Dark one, then.”

The man nodded.

Bilo poured a thick, shadow-black stout into a pewter mug and slid it across the bar. “Name’s Bilo. Welcome to the Mole. You got a name, or should I call you Grumpy?”

“Igol,” the man said, lifting the mug and drinking deeply.

After a long pull, he exhaled like a man dousing fire. “Food?”

Ulga appeared a moment later, wiping her hands on a cloth. “Boar meat, roasted with thyme. Potatoes and green salad from the garden. That do?”

Igol nodded once. “Aye.”

She disappeared and returned shortly with a heavy wooden tray piled high with steaming meat, buttery potatoes, and a simple salad flecked with chopped herbs. Igol dug in with the quiet purpose of a man who hadn't eaten well in days.

Four ales later, the edge had softened from his voice, and he leaned back against the stone wall beside the hearth.

"So," he said to Bilo, "you run this place yourself?"

Bilo poured another for both of them. "Me and the missus, aye. Been doin' it long enough. We brew our own—none of that thin, watery kegwater the big traders push. Got a stout that'll put hair on your teeth, a honey-amber for the lovers, and a bitter red that kicks harder than a mule in spring."

Igol raised an eyebrow. "You brew it all here?"

"In the back," Bilo said, puffing his chest slightly. "Cellar's got barrels bigger than a troll's backside. Ulga picks the herbs for the flavoured ones—rosemary, spruce tip, even some elderbark for the mid-winter stout."

From the kitchen doorway, Ulga emerged, untying her apron. She walked to the bar, grabbed a mug, filled it with her favorite dark ale, and drank half of it in one go. Froth clung to her upper lip like a white moustache. She licked it away with a grin.

"Talkin' about the beer again, are you?" she said.

"Just tellin' tales," Bilo muttered, then lifted both his ales and slammed them down one after the other. His cheeks puffed, his eyes crossed for half a breath, and then he leaned back and let loose a croak that echoed off the rafters like the groan of a drunken giant.

The room went quiet.

A wave of sulfurous air rolled through the tavern. Flies dropped from the air mid-buzz. A candle guttered out near the dice table. Mildok gagged quietly behind a barrel.

Igol stared, wide-eyed.

"That," Bilo said proudly, "is how you know the brew's settled right."

Ulga smacked him on the back with the flat of her hand. "You're banned from drinkin' doubles unless we open every window."

Ilondra chuckled from the corner and strummed a soft chord. "Every tavern needs a little magic," she said. "Some just stinks more than others."

The night rolled on with full mugs and louder laughter, and the Vicious Mole, as always, held the stories together.

The tavern's warmth held around the patrons like a well-worn blanket. Ilondra played soft chords in the background, something slow and pensive. Igol, now four ales deep, stared into

the fire with the steady stillness of a man staring through time, not into it. The rim of his mug lingered near his lip, untouched.

“Ever hear of a place called Brennmere?” he asked, not looking at anyone in particular.

Bilo gave a slow shake of the head. “Sounds peaceful.”

“It was,” Igol said. “A little river village. Fisherfolk, mostly. Quiet. My mother baked salt-bread that made your teeth hurt it was so crusted. My brother fished from a plank boat we built ourselves. Named it after a goose that used to chase us in the meadow.”

Ilondra’s song dwindled to a few lingering notes. No one interrupted.

“One night, they came. Bandits. Not even the clever sort—just drunk, mean, armored in rust and scraps. They didn’t want our food, didn’t ask about gold. They burned the bread ovens, kicked the door down on our chapel, laughed as they cut down the mayor mid-prayer.”

His voice went quiet, but not soft.

“I remember the smell. Wet thatch and blood. I remember my mother trying to push me and my brother under the cellar hatch. She didn’t make it down. She screamed. That’s the last sound I’ll ever forget.”

He drained the rest of his ale in one pull and set the mug down harder than needed.

“I ran. Through the cornfields. Barefoot. A man chased me—had a meat cleaver. Every step I thought I’d feel it in my back. Then he slipped in the dark. There was a ditch. He hit the rocks and didn’t get up. I didn’t stop running.”

Bilo, hands still on the bar, didn’t speak.

“When the sun came up, Brennmere was smoke. I was covered in ash and cuts. My feet were bleeding. I was hungry. My brother… I never saw him again. Might’ve burned. Might’ve run further than I did. I don’t know.”

Ulga handed him another mug without a word.

“That’s when my real life started,” Igol muttered. “Everything before that? That was just dreaming.”

The fire cracked in the silence. Ilondra plucked a low, mournful note from her lute, and Bilo slowly nodded, his face unreadable behind the beard.

“You survived,” Bilo finally said.

Igol looked up. “Aye. But not as the boy who ran barefoot. That one died in the cornfield.”

And then he drank. And the tavern held still around him, the shadows dancing softly on the old stone walls

Igol's eyes didn't leave the fire, though the tavern had resumed its rhythm—soft clinks of mugs, low murmurs, the scratch of Ulga's ladle against a pot in the kitchen. But around the bar, near where Bilo leaned in and Ilondra sat quietly with her lute across her knees, silence held its own.

"I walked for years," Igol said, voice thick like mud in spring. "Didn't know where I was headed. Didn't care. Mud roads, deer paths, wagon ruts. I slept under wagons when I could. Under trees when I couldn't. I've eaten bark, grubs, dog scraps, and once, half a boot stew cooked over fencepost coals."

He gave a grim chuckle, void of humor. "Toughest part was sleepin'—never knew if I'd wake with a blade in my ribs or a mule chewing my foot."

Bilo frowned. "No one gave a hand?"

Igol shook his head. "People help when they think it costs them nothing. I looked like cost. In one town, I reached for a loaf left out too long on a stall. A man caught me and near beat me to death in the alley behind his shop. Another time, I killed a man in a tavern brawl over spilled ale. His cousins hunted me for two days with bows and dogs. Slept in a privy just to throw them off my scent."

Ilondra winced. "Gods."

Igol flexed his fingers, rough and scarred. "Worked at a quarry one season—haulin' stone blocks so big I'd piss blood at night. Next town, I unloaded river barges till my back felt like shattered wood. No talking. Just orders and grunts."

He leaned back, took another drink, and looked at Bilo now. "But it wasn't the work that ruined me. It was the silence. You ever walk so long that the world goes too loud? Wind in trees sounds like laughter. Laughter sounds like mocking. And mocking's worse when no one knows your name."

He traced a scar across the back of his hand, the kind made by rope burn and panic.

"I stopped expecting people to help," he said. "Stopped expecting a warm bed, or even a warm word. All I looked for each day was how not to die before the next."

Ilondra whispered, "That's not living."

Igol didn't deny it. "No. It's not. But sometimes, not dying's all you get. And the only way to get that is to swing first."

He raised his mug and drank deep.

"I didn't fight for coin. Not for honor. Not for a flag. I fought 'cause it was either me or the man with the sharper blade."

Bilo, slowly polishing a mug that didn't need it, let out a long breath. "And now?"

Igol looked down into the froth of his ale, his voice almost a growl. “Now I still swing. But I pick when. And who.”

He set the mug down and let silence wrap around him once more, while the fire cast long, flickering shadows behind his words.

Igol didn’t speak for a long moment. The fire snapped, casting flickers of gold across the stone hearth. Ilondra’s fingers hovered over her lute, unmoving. Bilo had stopped polishing, his hands resting quietly on the counter. Even Ulga paused at the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on her apron, watching the man whose voice had dropped lower, quieter, as if the weight of his next words needed to be snuck in rather than spoken aloud.

“There’s a place north of the Wending Peaks,” Igol said. “What’s left of it, anyway. Alakthorn. Used to be a fortress, they say. Fell in some old war, or a feud, or a curse—no one remembers the details. Just that travelers don’t stop there anymore. Only stone left, and bad air.”

He leaned forward, eyes not on the fire now, but into it.

“I came there in a storm. Wind was howling, lightning splitting the hills. I was soaked through, feet bleeding, had nothing but a rusted blade I’d found near a burned-out wagon. Then I saw the walls. Cracked, blackened, but still standing. I ducked inside just to get dry.”

He drew in a breath through his teeth. “Most of it was rubble. But I found a stairway—half-buried, winding down. It didn’t make sense. Dry, cold air coming up. And I followed it.”

Bilo’s brows furrowed. “You always go down into unknown cellars, or was this a special day?”

Igol ignored the quip. “At the bottom, I found… a room. Stone walls, old banners, but clean. Pristine, even. A fire burned in a hearth like this one, and there was a woman there. Young. Pale, dark hair down her back. She looked up and smiled like she’d been expecting me.”

Ilondra’s mouth opened slightly, but no sound came.

“She gave me soup,” Igol said. “Hot. Tasted of marrow and wild roots. Let me sit by the fire. Asked nothing of me. That night, I laid beside her. In her warmth. I thought…” He shook his head. “I thought maybe the world was giving something back.”

The mug in his hand trembled slightly. He set it down.

“I woke up choking. Her hands were around my neck. And her face…”

He looked to Bilo, voice flat now. “It wasn’t human. Bloated. Purple-veined. Her belly swelled and rippled like something inside wanted out. Her breath smelled like spoiled meat. And her smile…”

Ilondra’s voice was faint. “A hag.”

“Aye. A swamp hag or something worse. She shrieked when I threw her off. And then… she called them.”

His hands clenched on the bar.

“Beasts came through the cracks in the stone. Dogs with human hands. Rats walking upright like soldiers, teeth clacking in time. I had nothing but that rusted sword. I fought until my arms were numb. I don’t know how many I killed. I don’t remember all of it. Just the sound of her voice when she laughed.”

He looked toward the ceiling as if seeing the memory written there.

“In the end, I pinned her to the stones, drove the sword through her belly. She screamed like a kettle boiling dry. And then she… she burst.”

“Burst?” Bilo echoed.

“Like a wineskin. Full of slime and bile and what I think were fingers. Room went dark. Took me two days to find my way out again.”

The fire cracked. No one spoke.

Finally, Bilo muttered, “Storms above.”

Igol raised his mug, half-full. “That was the day I stopped believing in shelter.”

He drank, and the firelight danced in silence.

The fire had burned down low, casting long shadows that clung to the corners of the Vicious Mole like quiet ghosts. Most of the patrons had drifted to their rooms or out into the night, but the core remained—Bilo behind the bar, Ulga at her favorite stool near the kitchen, Ilondra beside the hearth, lute silent but held gently in her lap. And Igol, worn as ever, one hand around his mug, eyes unfocused.

“I crawled out of that crypt with blood in my mouth and bile down my chest,” he said at last. “Couldn’t tell you how long I wandered. Hills were cold. Sky was worse. Didn’t sleep. Every time I blinked, I saw her again—bloated face, hands like claws, that grin.”

He reached for his mug but didn’t drink.

“I collapsed beneath a pine tree. Just fell over, bones and all. Fever took me. Couldn’t move. Could barely breathe. Might’ve died right there.”

Ilondra leaned in, voice soft. “But you didn’t.”

“No.” He glanced at her. “A woodcutter found me. Just a man with an axe and a mule cart. Dragged me to his hut, stoked a fire, fed me gruel with a cracked spoon for a week. Never asked who I was or what I’d seen. Just… kept feeding me.”

He paused. “Only real kindness I’ve ever had.”

Ulga exhaled through her nose and took a sip of her ale, eyes on him but saying nothing.

Ilondra asked, “Did you ever see him again?”

Igol shook his head. “No. Didn’t even learn his name. Didn’t seem right. I wasn’t supposed to stay. He was… safe. And I knew if I stayed too long, I’d bring my storm with me.”

Bilo, who’d been slowly pouring a pint from one of his heavy oak barrels, didn’t look up.

“Aye,” he said at length, his voice thick as dark stout. “Sometimes not knowin’ is cleaner.”

Igol gave a short nod. “That old hut? It felt like peace. Just a little fire, a roof, and no questions. But peace, real peace—” he shook his head, “it don’t sit well in my bones. I’ve learned not to trust quiet.”

The fire cracked softly.

“I left one morning. Didn’t even say goodbye. Just took a heel of bread and started walking before the frost melted.”

“And the storm?” Ilondra asked.

Igol looked at her, and for once, something flickered in his eyes that wasn’t anger or weariness. “Still with me. But it moves slower now.”

He finally drank, letting the ale sit in his mouth a moment before swallowing. Then he leaned back, and for a while, no one said anything. The hearth did the talking.

Igol’s voice came slower now, thick as river silt, like each word carried the weight of soaked earth still clinging to his back.

“After the woodcutter,” he said, “I tried to settle. Really settle. South of the Varnish Peaks, where the forest thins and the rocks rise like sleeping giants. No roads, no neighbors. Just quiet and trees.”

He stared into the hearth, eyes reflecting the fire’s glow.

“Spent a year hauling lumber in the logging camps. Backbreaking, but steady coin. Saved enough to buy a cart, some tools, a few sacks of nails. Found a patch of land no one claimed and started laying stone. Every rock, every timber, I set myself. Just one room, a hearth, and a bedroll. I carved spoons by the firelight—don’t know why. Never used more than one at a time.”

Ilondra smiled faintly, but didn’t speak.

“For three months, I lived there. Hunted rabbits. Cooked roots. Watched the stars and listened to owls. No one knew my name. No one asked questions. I even started to think… maybe the storm had passed.”

He lifted his shirt slightly, revealing a long scar across his shoulder, the skin twisted and jagged like claw marks carved by stone.

“Then the rains came. Four days, without stop. Cold, driving sheets that turned the ground to soup. On the fifth morning, I woke to a sound I’ll never forget—like the mountain coughing.”

He traced the rim of his mug.

“The trees snapped first. Then came the mud. I ran barefoot—no time for boots. A boulder the size of a cottage rolled past me, tore half the skin off my shoulder. I kept running. Didn't look back.”

Bilo muttered something under his breath and reached for a heavier mug.

“When I finally did look back,” Igol continued, “there was nothing. Just a wide, brown scar across the hill. My hut, the hearth, even the spoons… gone. Like it never happened. Like I never mattered.”

The fire popped, a single crack like a stone splitting in frost.

“I found a cave up the ridge. Dry. Cold. Wind came through the cracks like it had a name to whisper. I stayed there for weeks, listening. Every time the wind howled, I thought it said my name. Not loud. Just enough.”

He drank the last of his ale and didn’t ask for more.

“I built something with my hands. Watched the earth take it back like I was a trespasser. That was the last time I tried to make a home.”

Bilo didn’t offer comfort. He just poured himself another stout and raised it slowly.

“Well,” he said, “the Mole ain’t carved from stone, and the ale’s always wet, but you’re here now.”

Igol gave a faint, crooked grin. “Aye. For now.”

Igol’s voice dropped as he spoke again, low and clipped, like the crackle of kindling just before it burns.

“One winter, somewhere past the Fogdraw, I crossed a snowfield alone. Flat land. No trees. Just white, like the sky had fallen and buried the world. I’d lost my coat to a river crossing two days before. Had a belt knife and half a heel of frozen bread.”

Bilo muttered, “Madness to be out there alone.”

“Aye,” Igol said, nodding. “But the kind of madness that follows a man like me around.”

He rubbed his hands, slow and deliberate, as if remembering cold that hadn’t quite left.

“I didn’t see the wolves at first. Just prints—big ones, wide splayed toes. Then shapes, flickering behind the snow curtain. They didn’t run. Didn’t fear me. They were hungry. Bone-skinny, ribs like harp strings, and eyes like coals sunk in white fur.”

Ulga had stopped stirring her pot, watching him now from the edge of the kitchen doorway.

“I ran until I found a tree. Lone pine, gnarled, half-dead. Climbed it. Took bark off my palms doing it. Sat up there with my knife, knees locked around a branch while they circled below. Seven of ‘em. Maybe more.”

Ilondra shuddered. “For how long?”

“Two nights. No fire. No food. Snow falling on my shoulders like a shroud. First night, I sang to stay awake. Second night, I stopped feeling my fingers.”

He tapped the handle of his mug softly.

“Third night, one got bold. Climbed partway up, front paws on the lower limb. I waited until it lunged. Then I drove the knife in its eye.”

He paused.

“The sound it made… it wasn’t a howl. It was like something breaking that shouldn’t break. The others took its body, dragged it off, tore it in half within earshot. I can still hear it sometimes, in dreams—wet teeth and the crack of bones.”

Bilo leaned on the bar. “But they left?”

“They did,” Igol said. “Too much blood, maybe. Or they knew I’d take one more with me if they tried again.”

“And you?” Ilondra asked.

“Climbed down the next morning. Couldn’t feel my legs. Hands blistered, black on the edges. Walked two days through the snow, following a frozen stream. Thought about lying down a few times. Thought about the wolves coming back.”

He gave a bleak half-smile. “Finally reached a hamlet. Smoke from chimneys never looked so holy. They gave me stew. I couldn’t hold the spoon.”

He held up his hands, flexing them slowly. “They shook too much.”

The tavern held still again. Only the fire spoke, crackling its quiet comfort.

Igol leaned back and finally let out a breath.

“Cold never left me after that. Even on warm days, I feel it in the joints.”

Bilo reached for a bottle under the bar, poured a dark, spiced liquor into a smaller glass, and slid it toward him. “Then here’s fire for your blood.”

Igol took it, nodded once, and drank.

The tavern's warmth wrapped around the moment like an old blanket left too long in a cedar chest—soft, dusty, filled with the scent of something once sweeter. Igol swirled his drink slowly, watching the amber twist like old smoke. He didn't speak for a long time.

"Merla," he said finally, voice catching on the name like it didn't want to come out. "Plain girl. Hair always half-tied, freckles on her chin, walked with a bit of a limp from falling off a cart as a child. I met her in a farming town two days off the Myren Road."

Ilondra leaned forward, her fingers idly brushing the strings of her lute without sound.

"She sold eggs at the market. Mended my shirt after I split it hauling sacks of feed for her uncle. Brought me a pie once. Apple, with crust so thick you had to gnaw it. We walked the orchard together, just hand in hand, not sayin' much."

He gave a small, bitter smile.

"For a few days, I forgot I was broken. Forgot that the world had its teeth in me."

Bilo poured another ale, slower this time, eyes narrowed and soft.

"Then the fire came," Igol said. "Barn went up in the night. No one knows how. Could've been a lantern, could've been lightning. The sky was clear, but trouble don't always need thunder."

He tapped his fingers on the bar.

"I ran in. Horses were screaming. Kicked one of the stalls open, got three of them out. Then the roof groaned, and I knew I was too deep. A timber came down. Broke my ribs, crushed the side of my chest."

Ilondra's hand froze on her lute.

"She pulled me out," Igol said quietly. "Merla. Barely half my size, but she dragged me free by my arms, sobbing the whole way. Got me past the threshing floor, past the flames. I remember choking on the smoke and thinking I'd die with the smell of hay in my nose."

Bilo's jaw worked as he set the pint down.

"She turned back," Igol continued. "Said her cat was still inside. Damn thing with one ear and a crooked tail. I told her no. Screamed it. But she smiled at me. Just smiled. Like I didn't know what was coming."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a ragged bit of cloth—scorched on the edges, faded pink with tiny stitched flowers.

"She never came back out. I found this in the yard, where she must've dropped it. Used to tie her hair with it."

He set it gently on the bar.

Bilo looked at it, then grunted low. “Damn fool thing to die for a cat.”

Igol nodded, eyes glassy but steady. “Still makes me miss her.”

Ulga came out from the kitchen, silent for once, and sat down with a mug of hot tea.

Not one of them said another word for a while. The fire burned. The handkerchief lay between them like a gravestone no one had the heart to move.

The Vicious Mole had quieted again, the room dim with evening and firelight. Rain tapped the windows like fingers seeking entry, and a faint draft curled around the base of the hearth. Igol’s voice returned—quieter now, like worn boots dragging over gravel.

“There was a man once,” he said, “name was Darnel. Met him outside a roadside shrine, north of the Heathen Rocks. Shared a fire, a rabbit, and half a bottle of prune brandy. He told stories about his kids. I gave him my last turnip.”

Ilondra tilted her head. “You trusted him?”

Igol shrugged. “Didn’t trust him. Just… needed to eat. Needed not to be alone one night.”

He shifted on the stool, staring into the bottom of his mug.

“In the morning, I woke up, and my coin pouch was gone. Darnel stood there smiling like a priest with a secret. Said thanks for the company. Turned and walked off down the road like he hadn’t just gutted my week’s earnings.”

Bilo’s face didn’t change, but his hand paused on a keg valve.

“I chased him. Barefoot. Across shale, down goat paths, through brambles that tore my feet open like parchment. I was too angry to stop, too numb to feel the cuts. He kept looking back. Laughing.”

Igol’s fingers curled slightly, knuckles white.

“Then the ground gave out under him. Ravine was narrow, steep. He fell in with a crack like firewood snapping. When I found him, he was down there, leg twisted under him like a broken chair, crying.”

Ilondra winced. “What did you do?”

“I climbed down. Stood over him.” Igol didn’t blink. “He begged. Told me he didn’t mean to. Said he had children, said he was sorry.”

He glanced toward the hearth.

“I looked at him a long time. Then I climbed back up.”

No one said anything.

“I didn’t leave because I wanted him to die,” Igol said, voice raw. “I left because I didn’t care if he did.”

He lifted his mug and drained it.

“I’d love to tell you I was better than that. That I had a moment of grace. But I didn’t. I was tired. Angry. Barefoot and bleeding. And I never looked back.”

Bilo didn’t speak. He just slid another mug across the bar—slow, careful, like he was setting down something fragile.

Igol picked it up with steady hands and drank. No toast. No thanks. Just silence, and the sound of the fire cracking under the weight of stories best not told too often.

The hearth was low, burning red and slow, as though listening. The last of the night’s patrons had trickled upstairs or drifted home, leaving only Ilondra, Ulga, Bilo, and the man with too many miles in his bones. Igol leaned on the bar, elbow sunk into the scarred wood, mug in one hand, the fire reflected in the dark liquid like a fading star.

“I’ve walked a long road,” he said, voice soft now, the gravel in it worn smoother. “Not always forward. Not always with purpose. Just... onward. Dust in my boots, mud in my teeth, no compass but the next ache.”

He stared into the mug, as if it held answers.

“Once, I slept inside the hollow of a dead stump during a lightning storm. Tree lit up three hills away like a god’s torch. I counted the thunder to guess where the next one would land.”

Ilondra didn’t ask anything. She just listened.

“Another time, I ate spoiled cabbage for a week because it was all I had. Couldn’t keep it down, but hunger always wins.”

He didn’t laugh. Not even a smile.

“In a coastal village, I watched a boy drown trying to impress his friends—jumped from a dock into a tide he couldn’t fight. They ran when he didn’t come up. I pulled him out. Buried him myself.”

His hands clenched the mug gently, as if anything firmer would break it—or him.

“I’ve seen every kind of man fail. Mercenaries who begged for mothers they hadn’t seen in decades. Children too small for swords trying to protect their sisters. I buried more than I ever wanted to.”

Bilo didn’t interrupt.

“I came to this city not because I wanted something,” Igol went on. “Just because my legs wouldn’t stop. And my stomach growled like it remembered what warmth used to feel like.”

He paused and finally looked up, eyes tired but clear.

“I think I forgot how to stop moving. Maybe I’m scared to. If I stop, I might hear all the things that follow me. Might remember the names of the ones I left behind.”

There was a silence then. Not empty—but full. Heavy, like wet blankets left to dry in fireless rooms.

Bilo finally cleared his throat and said, in that quiet way only dwarves seemed to manage after listening longer than they were comfortable with:

“There’s worse places to sit than here. And worse folks to cry in front of than a dwarf with ale.”

Igol cracked something close to a smile. Not joy. But maybe peace.

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, and raised his mug, not high, not loud, but steady.

And in the Vicious Mole, the fire kept burning

The fire burned low, a soft heart of coals whispering into the silence. Igol sat with his hands around the empty mug like it was the last thing tethering him to the room. His eyes didn’t move from its worn rim, and when he spoke again, his voice cracked like frost splitting stone.

“I have nothing,” he said. “No name anyone would remember, no grave to tend, no face that waits for me to return. Just this body. And all it’s survived.”

Ilondra rested her lute across her lap, silent, her gaze fixed gently on the man before her.

“I don’t know if the world has a place for me,” Igol said. “I’m not a hero. Not a villain either. Just… someone the world chewed on and didn’t finish.”

His shoulders sagged, and his words stumbled, softer now.

“Maybe I came here to finally stop. Or to ask if stopping was allowed.”

The last word barely made it out. A tear slid down his cheek, catching in the stubble, then another, until he bowed his head and let them fall freely, silent and shuddering.

Bilo didn’t speak. He didn’t have to. The dwarf stepped out from behind the bar with slow, heavy steps. He crossed the hearth, boots thudding soft as drums, and stood beside Igol.

Without a word, Bilo set his hand on the man’s shoulder. Broad. Warm. Steady.

“You’re alive,” he said, the words low and sure, like stones laid on sacred ground. “And tonight, your bed’s dry. That’s enough for now.”

Igol didn’t look up, just nodded, shoulders shaking, breath uneven.

“No need to pay for the food and ale,” Bilo added. “You already paid in full—with truth.”

Ulga, watching from the archway, had nothing clever to say. She only moved quietly back toward the kitchen, her steps soft as snow.

Ilondra reached forward, brushed one note across her lute—quiet, wistful, like a breeze catching a shutter in the wind.

And in the quiet of the Vicious Mole, with the mugs empty and the fire flickering down to its last golden glow, a broken man wept—held together not by strength, but by the telling of what he carried. By the ears that heard. And by the room that let him stop, if only for one night.

A Man in Armor

Five days later the heavy oak doors of the Vicious Mole groaned open with a gust of wind and a shimmer of steel. Every head in the tavern turned. Standing in the threshold was a man tall as a coat rack, broader than the hearth, clad head to toe in gleaming plate armor. The edges of his pauldrons glistened with dark smears—not rust, but blood, dried and cracked. His tabard bore the golden sunburst of the White Light Brotherhood, that holy order of militant crusaders known more for broken swords than healed hearts.

He didn’t speak. Just stepped inside, his boots thudding like hammers on stone, and made straight for a corner table where the firelight caught only the edges of his silhouette. With a practiced motion, he unstrapped his gauntlets and set them side by side, fingers facing east.

His sword, still sheathed, he kept at his side—never leaning it against a wall, never setting it down.

Bilo stepped out from behind the bar, wiping his hands on a rag with a cautious glance toward the table.

“What’ll it be?” the dwarf asked, voice neutral.

The armored man spoke, his voice low and even, with the kind of calm that came after battles, not before them.

“Water. Meat. And a measure of holy wine.”

Bilo raised a brow. “We’ve got goat milk, two kinds of ale—dark and darker—and some honey mead from Ulga’s cousin up the hill. But nothing blessed unless you count the stew.”

The knight nodded, unfazed. “Water and meat, then. I have no quarrel with ordinary fare.”

Ulga, already at the hearth, turned with a brow arched and set a thick slice of roast on the fire.

Hiromen, for that was the name etched along his scabbard in golden dwarvish, sat motionless as the tavern murmurs ebbed around him. The usual rattle of dice, slaps on the back, and shouted boasts softened under his presence. Even old Thora’s laughter dropped to a hush. The tavern seemed to breathe slower, more cautiously, as if unsure what had just entered it.

The food came quick, and Bilo himself brought it, setting down a plate of boar flank, root mash, and a tankard of cool well water.

Hiromen folded his hands before eating, eyes closing. He whispered something—not a chant, but a string of syllables that hung in the air like smoke.

Then, lifting his water, he muttered aloud, “Holy Lord forgive me. I cave in skulls before I break bread.”

Bilo stood a moment longer, uncertain, then cleared his throat. “Long day?”

Hiromen’s eyes flicked up from the meal—gray, pale as ice floes, and steady.

“Yes,” he said. “And it began with prayer.”

He took another bite, chewed slowly, and as the firelight danced across his breastplate and the blood that hadn’t yet been washed away, he began to speak.

Hiromen sat still, chewing each bite with mechanical precision, like he was grinding more than meat between his teeth. His eyes stared into a corner of the tavern where shadows flickered. Then, slow and firm, he spoke.

“This morning,” he began, “I walked through the woods outside Redmere. Heard the birds go silent. That’s always the sign.”

He set down his tankard, water untouched since the blessing, and clenched one gauntleted hand into a fist beside his plate.

“Six of them. Elves. Lean, quick, armor like moonlight and tempers like poisoned fangs. They’d taken the Chapel of the White Light, driven the caretakers into the marsh. Smeared blood on the altar. Carved filthy runes into the pews. Sat on the pulpit like they owned the sky.”

He looked around, gaze cold as split iron.

“I called them out. Their leader came forward—gold-braided hair, sword he carried like he thought it was part of his body. Thought it’d be a dance. He grinned, told me to bow before the new gods.”

Hiromen tapped the edge of his plate with one finger.

“I challenged him. Single combat. He accepted, out of pride.”

His voice dipped low, nearly a growl.

“I caved that man’s head in like a baby he was born yesterday. One blow. Split helm. His skull rang like a cracked bell and he hit the stones like dropped grain.”

There was a pause. The room was so quiet, the fire’s crack sounded like a scream.

“The others didn’t wait. They rushed me—breaking the duel. Cowards. They brought blades and curses. I answered with steel. And flame. The holy lord and the bright light seared their cowardice into ash. One screamed for his mother. Another tried to run.”

Hiromen exhaled, long and hard, and stared into the table as if it might bleed.

“When it was done, I stood in the center of the chapel, blood halfway up my shins. Not a soul moved. Just the wind. Just the smell of burned flesh.”

He folded his hands, the blood on his gauntlets dull in the firelight.

“I knelt. Not for them. For the altar. For the place they mocked. For the house they defiled.”

Bilo, ever curious, but now wary, leaned slightly forward, voice low.

“Did they deserve it?”

Hiromen’s eyes snapped toward him. He raised one gauntlet and slammed it onto the table with a crack like a smith’s hammer.

“For the righteous sake, they mocked the good lord’s house!” he bellowed. “Damn darkness of the devil’s den they crawled from!”

Silence. Even the fire didn’t dare pop.

Hiromen took a breath, then picked up his fork again with eerie calm and resumed eating, as if he hadn't just brought thunder into the room.

Bilo slowly stepped back, wiping a nonexistent smudge from his beard.

"Right then," he murmured, "so… more potatoes?"

The storm in Hiromen's voice had passed, but the silence it left behind clung to the air like mist. He sat straighter now, shoulders square, as though remembering the weight of old banners across his back. After a long pause, he reached for his water and drank, slow and measured.

Bilo cleared his throat from the bar. "That Brotherhood of yours," he said cautiously, "ain't just some mercenary flock, is it?"

Hiromen set the tankard down, eyes unreadable. "No. We are not sellblades."

He leaned forward, folding his fingers over one another with reverent precision.

"The White Light Brotherhood is two thousand years old. Born in fire and black sky. When the Black Crusades tore the world open and demons walked among men, it was the Light that stood in their path. Priests, peasants, warriors—all burned in one holy fire, and from it rose the Brotherhood."

He tapped his chest, just above his heart, where the tabard's sunburst glinted in the firelight.

"We are anointed in fire and water before our tenth year. Taught to read before we can lift a sword. We memorize the Words of Brightness, learn the thousand sins, and train under the whip and psalm. When we are ready, we kneel naked before the altar. We bleed, and we burn, and if the flame accepts us, we rise."

Hiromen spoke not with pride, but with conviction, as though quoting scripture etched in his bones.

"Our creed is this: Purge the darkness. Protect the meek. Speak truth, even if your voice trembles."

He closed his eyes for a moment, lips moving soundlessly.

"There are three strongholds of the Brotherhood still standing. Tarsfield, Vellenreach, and the Spines. Each watched over by an Elder of Light—men who can recite every passage, who have not drawn swords in fifty winters and yet could still cleave a lie in two with a glance."

He opened his eyes again, and for a moment, something softened behind the steel.

"My mentor was Father Adrelm. A small man. Grey, with a limp from a demon's blade. He never shouted. Never struck. But when he spoke, the whole chapel listened."

Hiromen stared into the fire now, words falling quieter.

“He told me once: ‘Your sword is not your justice. It is your duty. Do not mistake the two.’”

He sat back, silence descending again.

“Holy Lord forgive me,” he muttered, staring into his empty cup. “I forget that sometimes.”

Hiromen’s gauntlets lay beside his plate, fingers curled in stillness, but his eyes had drifted far beyond the Vicious Mole. The firelight cast flickers on the metal of his armor, as if it remembered a battlefield. Slowly, he spoke again.

“Gorba the Tusksplitter,” he said, the name like a stone dropped in a well. “An orc war-chief. Carved a kingdom out of three farming villages near the eastern hills. Demanded tribute. Took sheep, grain, sons, and daughters. Left heads on fences to remind them.”

Ulga, wiping down a table nearby, paused and glanced over with a frown. Even Ilondra, tuning her lute in the corner, stilled her hands.

“I rode out alone,” Hiromen continued. “Didn’t ask for backup. Didn’t wait for permission. Just followed the smoke.”

He took a breath, the kind a man takes before recalling blood.

“I arrived at dawn. Two hundred orcs around smoky fires, sharpening blades, gnawing bones. Their camp stank of meat, old steel, and victory. I walked into the center of it, cloak still steaming from the morning frost. Called out the chief by name.”

Bilo leaned forward slowly, the edge of his curiosity pulling him toward the story like iron to a magnet.

“He came. Gorba. Seven feet tall. Tusks like daggers and shoulders like millstones. Scar across one eye. He laughed. Took up his axe. Told me I was either mad or holy.”

Hiromen smiled, but not kindly.

“I told him I was both.”

He reached for his tankard and drank deep before continuing.

“We fought in the center of his camp. Ring of orcs around us, snarling, spitting, watching. It wasn’t a duel of grace. It was war in miniature. Axe against hammer. Fist against helm. Blood splattered the frozen ground.”

Hiromen flexed his thick fingers.

“I shattered his knee with a hammer swing so hard I felt it in my soul. Dropped him to the ground like a tree felled by judgment.”

There was a moment of silence in the tavern. The fire snapped.

“And the others?” Bilo asked, voice steady but low. “What did the orcs do?”

“They watched,” Hiromen said. “And then… they turned. Walked away. Their leader broken, the weight of his power snapped like his bone.”

He looked at Bilo, that pale steel gaze unblinking.

Bilo rubbed his beard. “Did they deserve mercy?”

Hiromen’s jaw set like stone. His voice, when it came, was hard as forged truth.

“Mercy is for those who drop their sword. Not those who sharpen it on children’s bones.”

The fire had burned lower now, its warmth turning to a quieter orange glow that danced along the stone walls and caught the edge of Hiromen’s armor like dying sunlight. The tavern listened, hushed but present, the kind of stillness that gathers around a tale too close to pain.

Hiromen’s voice, when it came again, was slower. Measured. Not the steel certainty of battle or creed—this time it came like confession.

“There was a village,” he said. “Small. Half a day’s ride east of Vellenreach. I was sent there to settle a matter of blood. A tax collector had gone missing. When I arrived, they brought me to his body—buried shallow behind the chapel. His throat slit. Hands bound.”

Ilondra’s lute lay untouched in her lap. Even Ulga had stopped her cleaning, the rag hanging loose in one hand.

“She was a mother,” Hiromen continued. “Stood straight when I questioned her. Said the man had stolen from her for five winters. Taken coin, taken grain. Taken meat from her boy’s mouth. And no one stopped him. No one ever does.”

He set his jaw and looked down at the empty tankard before him.

“She didn’t run. Didn’t lie. Just stood there and said, ‘Yes. I did it.’”

“The law?” Bilo asked, voice rough.

“Was clear,” Hiromen said. “She had killed a servant of the crown. No trial. No appeal. Judgment on sight.”

He looked away, gaze somewhere far beyond the hearth.

“The villagers begged. Said she was kind. Said she had saved three children from a fire last spring. Said her son was sick and she was all he had.”

He took a breath that shook, though he tried to hide it.

“I prayed. For guidance. For mercy. For a loophole I could climb through and still keep my vow.”

There was a long pause.

“And then I drew my blade. I did not blink. I passed sentence. As I had been taught.”

Hiromen closed his eyes.

“And that night, I wept.”

He leaned back slowly, the weight of his armor seeming heavier now than when he walked in.

“Even sin,” he said, “can wear a mother’s face. Even justice can wear a blindfold.”

Bilo said nothing. He just reached for a bottle, uncorked it, and poured himself another drink. No toast. No judgment.

The logs in the hearth crackled softly as Hiromen spoke, his voice like a worn whetstone scraping across memory. There was less weight in his armor now, or perhaps more—it clung to him not like defense, but burden.

“Deadroot Forest,” he muttered, staring past the tavern walls. “A campaign sent to chase down a heretic sorcerer who fled east with a stolen relic—some say a bone of a saint, others, the finger of a devil.”

He paused and rubbed his wrist, where the edge of his gauntlet had rubbed the skin raw. “We marched twelve knights and twice as many squires. But the forest had no mercy. No game, no sun, no fresh water—just mold, fog, and the sound of your own heartbeat.”

“Didn’t they send supplies?” asked a young man at a side table, curiosity overcoming fear.

Hiromen shook his head. “Wagons mired. Horses died. We rationed pine cones and leather scraps. One knight died from a fever that made him speak only in hymns. Another ran screaming into the trees, never seen again. Might’ve turned into bark, for all I know.”

He took a breath. “Me, I carried a boy named Aldrun on my back for three days—squire to Sir Velder. Took a spear through the gut. Couldn’t walk. We didn’t have bandages, so I wrapped him in my banner.”

Ilondra, now seated with both hands over her mouth, whispered, “Did he survive?”

Hiromen nodded slowly. “Aye. Barely. We came upon a monastery—forgotten, broken stone and ghost-light at the windows. We camped in the crypt. No food. Wolves came that night.”

He flexed his fingers, remembering the rawness in them.

“I fought them bare-handed. Tore one’s jaw off with my grip. I bled more than they did. Aldrun was behind me, shivering, near dead. I didn’t think we’d see dawn.”

He looked at Bilo, then his cup.

“I begged the Holy Lord for strength. What I got was blood in my teeth.”

A long silence followed. Then a thin smile, almost wistful.

“We lit a fire with torn pages from a ruined hymnal. Boiled pine needles for broth. Drank it from a rusted helm.”

He touched his lips, as if tasting it again.

“Still tasted holy to me.”

The tavern had grown still as snow under Hiromen’s voice, each word a weight pressed onto the fire-warmed wood and stone. He sat with his gauntlets now clutched before him like prayer stones, his eyes lowered as though the telling itself were penance.

“There was one among us,” he began, “a brother named Sir Dellan. He wore the same sunburst on his tabard. Took the same vows. Ate from the same bowls and bled in the same trenches.”

He looked up slowly, voice quieter now, steady and stripped of heat.

“But something changed in him. He began preaching a softer truth. Told villagers that mercy outweighed law, that redemption mattered more than punishment. Stopped punishing thieves. Let bandits flee. Said justice must begin with understanding.”

Hiromen stared at the hearth like he saw that very moment replaying in the flames.

“I was sent to bring him back.”

He drew a slow breath through his nose.

“We met atop the chapel in Hollow Mere. Rain hammered the roof tiles like war drums. He stood there unarmed at first, arms spread, begging me to listen.”

“And did you?” Ulga asked from the kitchen threshold.

Hiromen didn’t answer right away.

“He picked up his sword only when I raised mine. We fought in the rain, our boots slipping on slick stone. It was not a duel of equals. He hesitated. I didn’t.”

Bilo leaned on the bar, listening without pouring this time.

“I split his helm,” Hiromen said. “One stroke. From crown to jaw. The wrath of heaven, guided by my hands.”

He closed his eyes, jaw tightening.

“His last word was ‘forgive.’”

A long, still breath passed through the tavern.

“I was too fast,” he said. “Too eager. I didn’t wait for repentance. Didn’t ask if it had already begun.”

Ilondra blew one soft, wrong note and silenced it.

“Holy Lord forgive me,” Hiromen murmured, as if he didn’t expect to be heard. “I still dream of him. Standing under a sun that does not rise.”

The fire gave a little hiss, like breath pulled through ash. And no one spoke.

The weight in Hiromen’s voice eased, just a little, like armor loosened at the straps after a long march. His eyes lost their sharpness, the intensity tempered by something gentler—recollection, maybe, or the aching shape of something long gone.

“There were moments,” he said, “small ones. Too few, but real.”

He turned his cup slowly, the dregs inside tracing a crooked circle. “After I broke a band of highwaymen near the canyon road, I escorted the captives back to their village. On the way, I walked a little girl across the bridge—her father was among those I saved.”

His lips twitched in something close to a smile.

“She plucked a dandelion, dirt still on the root, and handed it to me like it was a royal medal. Told me I looked like a knight from her storybook. I took it. Pressed it in my travel journal.”

Bilo gave a small grunt. “Still got it?”

Hiromen nodded. “Pages fell apart. But the flower’s still there.”

He let the pause hang for a breath, then continued.

“There was an old baker in Farthill,” he said. “Fat, mostly blind. Gave me a whole loaf of honey bread and said, ‘Take it, Shiny Saint. I like your manners.’ Called me that every time I passed through.”

Ulga chuckled faintly from behind the kitchen doorway.

Hiromen reached down to his side, thumb brushing the pommel of his sword.

“And once… I gave part of my rations to a dog. Skinny thing. Lost, one ear torn. Slept curled near my fire for nearly a fortnight. Followed me through rain and snow. Didn’t ask for anything. Just… stayed. Like I was worth trusting.”

He fell silent again, but it wasn’t the silence of grief this time—it was memory settling back into its chamber.

“Joy is not loud,” he said finally. “It’s a quiet knock on a dark door.”

He looked into the flames, voice softer still.

“And guilt… that’s what answers.”

The coals in the hearth had burned low, casting long shadows across the tavern floor. The scent of char and stewed onions hung in the air, but neither reached Hiromen's nose. He was somewhere deeper now, not in place but in thought.

"The Holy Lord and the bright light guide me," he said, hands resting loosely on the edge of the table. "But sometimes, I wonder if the sun even sees me."

No one replied. The tavern knew not to interrupt a man who spoke from somewhere below his armor.

"I've lost companions," Hiromen continued. "Watched brothers fall to arrows, blades, and their own fear. I've buried them with their mouths still open in prayer. And I've killed men—some with evil in their eyes, some already repenting when the blade fell."

His jaw worked slowly as he stared into the glowing ash.

"Is it faith if it never shakes?" he asked, not of anyone in particular. "Or am I just too stubborn to question it?"

Bilo exhaled, a low hum in the back of his throat. "Do you regret it all?"

Hiromen turned toward him, his expression unreadable but not cold.

"No," he said. "But I regret parts of me that were burned away to stay on the path."

He reached down, fingers curling over the hilt of his sword—not in threat, but in recognition.

"This blade," he whispered, "is honest. Too honest."

The tavern fell quiet again, save for the fire's sigh and the creak of wooden beams. And in that silence, faith hung—tarnished, dented, but not yet broken.

The last of the meat lay picked clean on Hiromen's plate, the gravy pooled with crumbs and torn bread crust. His water had gone warm, the firelight bouncing off its surface, bending his reflection like a face seen through tears.

He stared into it for a long while before speaking.

"Today I killed a man who begged."

His voice, so often iron and fire, came low and hollow. No edge. Just weight.

"Holy Lord of the Righteous forgive me—I didn't wait."

The tavern had quieted again, even the clink of mugs forgotten.

"I was angry," he continued. "He reminded me of someone I failed to save. The way he held his hands up. The way he said my name. So I let the rage swing first."

Bilo said nothing, just watched him, hands folded over the bar.

Hiromen looked up then, eyes not wet, but unguarded. “Do you think justice can be holy,” he asked quietly, “if it’s born of wrath?”

Bilo sighed, not the kind of sigh that ends things, but the kind that digs through thought.

“No,” he said at last. “But it can still try to be good.”

Hiromen nodded slowly, as if the words struck some hidden bell inside his chest.

His mouth pulled at the corners into sadness.

He stood, gauntlets sliding back on with slow, ritual motion. From a pouch at his side, he laid three gold coins on the counter, their ring a final note.

“If I die tomorrow,” he said, voice returned to steel but softened at the edges, “let the good Lord see me trying. That’s all I’ve left.”

And with that, he turned and marched out the tavern door, cloak snapping behind him like a banner caught in storm wind.

The door shut.

The fire popped.

And in the hush that followed, Bilo reached for a mug, filled it halfway, and muttered, “Trying’s more than most.”

He set the mug aside, untouched. For no one in particular.

Morning at the Vicious Mole came not with songbirds, but with Ulga’s sharp voice rattling up the rafters and the scent of onions already sizzling in boar fat. Bilo rolled from his bed with the grace of a rolling barrel, grumbling about the stiffness in his knees and the sting of last night’s ale still knocking about behind his eyes. Downstairs, the tavern was quiet but not still. Mildok, the youngest of their hands, was already sweeping beneath the benches, his strokes lazy until Ulga barked once from the kitchen, and the broom suddenly found purpose. Thora, lean and steady as ever, was skinning carrots with a knife too large for the job but perfect in her hands. Her rhythm never faltered. Ulga worked beside her, sleeves rolled up, apron dusted with flour and grease, arms red from boiling water as she cleaned the iron pot for the day’s stew—venison, mushrooms, pearl barley, and whatever root vegetables the cart had coughed up that week.

In the back, Bilo moved to the brewroom, where three squat barrels the size of oxen sat like sleeping giants. He uncapped the first, sniffed deep, and nodded. That batch would be ready in two days—dark, nutty, with the bark-bitten edge he preferred in winter brews. Today he began a new patch: a golden-red bitter for the harvest crowd. He poured malt into the steaming kettle, stirring with a paddle thicker than his arm. Steam rose around him, filling the stone room with the sour-sweet perfume of barley and woodsmoke. He added dry hops, some from the garden wall, others smuggled in sacks from a gnome trader who swore by their bite.

Back in the main room, the windows were thrown open to let in the crisp air, and Thora polished mugs until they gleamed. Mildok finished sweeping and took to stacking kindling near the hearth. Ulga rolled out dough for flatbread with her knuckles, slapping it flat against the stone counter and dusting it with crushed rosemary and salt. Bilo returned an hour later, arms soaked from elbow to wrist, face streaked with sweat, but pleased.

"New batch's on," he announced. "If it ferments half as well as it smells, we'll need more mugs come week's end."

Ulga didn't look up. "We'll need a new Mildok if he forgets to wipe the baseboards again."

"I did!" came the lad's voice, panicked from somewhere behind a barrel.

"No you didn't!" Ulga barked, and the kitchen burst into laughter.

The day had only begun, but already the bones of the Mole were waking. Tables set, stew brewing, ale dreaming in the casks. Another day's rhythm, hard-earned and honest.

By late afternoon, the Vicious Mole breathed with the life of a full belly and the noise of coin on wood. The scent of fresh stew, baked flatbread, and roasted onion fat warmed the walls, and smoke from the hearth mingled with the spicy twist of Bilo's pipeweed, curling lazily into the rafters. Bilo himself sat on his high stool behind the bar, thick fingers curled around a glazed clay mug of his own dark brew. He puffed at his pipe between gulps, laughing aloud at no one in particular, eyes glinting with the easy joy of a tavern doing well.

The door creaked open again and again, each time letting in a new guest and a swirl of autumn chill. A burly woodsman with a red scarf and hands like bark sat at the nearest table, nodding silently to Bilo before ordering an ale with a single silver flicked from his calloused fingers. Behind him came two traveling merchants in mud-spattered cloaks, their boots heavy with dust and talk of road tolls and bad hay. They carried coin, though, and their coin clinked quickly into the dice pots at the corner table.

Three tables had drawn sets of dice, and by now the games were heating to fire. A gaunt half-elf with sunken cheeks and silk gloves—clearly a cheat by nature, if not yet in act—rolled calmly beside a round-faced halfling woman in a green cloak, who laughed like she didn't mind losing just to stay in the game. The pile between them grew steadily as she took two mugs of ale, leaning back with an easy grin each time her roll came up sixes.

At another table sat a group of miners off shift, their fingernails black with silver dust, their cheeks ruddy with drink. They played loud, slapped the table harder than needed, and kept shouting about "honest rolls" and "beer-blessed luck." One of them, a bald man with a tattoo of a pickaxe across his temple, threw down a full gold coin and bellowed, "Let's make it interestin', boys!" The others whooped and poured another round, calling for more stew from Ulga, who delivered it with a clatter and a sharp word for the mess they'd already made.

Thora moved between tables with her quiet grace, topping off mugs, catching stray spills with a rag, nodding politely to familiar faces. She had eyes like a hawk and ears like a cat—if

anyone tried to slip a coin from the pot or pour ale into a boot, she'd be there with a hand on their wrist before they knew what hit them.

From her corner by the hearth, Ilondra sat on a three-legged stool, flute across her lips. Her fingers danced over the instrument, lilting tunes of forest paths and long-lost rivers weaving through the noise. Now and again, she sang—soft, not to silence the crowd but to brush against it, her voice the wind through trees none of them could see but all of them remembered.

Bilo puffed a long stream of smoke and raised his mug again, ale frothing over his beard. His eyes danced from dice pots to mugs, from strangers' stories to old friends' jests. Each silver dropped for a drink was another note in his evening's song, and the Vicious Mole hummed with it. Ale poured, dice clattered, and the fire snapped. Another night well underway.

Druids visit

The tavern was quieter that morning, the kind of quiet that settles only after a night of dice, drink, and half-remembered songs. A soft rain tapped against the windows like a polite guest waiting its turn. The hearth was lit but low, and Ulga was stirring oats into a great iron pot when the door creaked open and let in a man who looked as though he belonged more to the forest than to the town.

Barod stepped inside without haste, his brown cloak sodden and glistening like the bark of an old oak after storm. His white beard was streaked with twigs, and his eyes, green as moss on

stone, scanned the room not with caution but calm. At his heels padded a small red fox, fur puffed against the damp, amber eyes watching every movement with silent grace.

“Morning to ye,” Barod said, his voice warm as a summer brook. “I don’t need a pint—just a bowl of warm water, if it’s not too dear.”

Ulga, halfway through chopping apples, raised a brow but said nothing. She fetched a clean bowl, filled it from the kettle, and set it gently on the bar. Barod nodded gratefully and knelt beside his fox, letting the creature lap from his cupped hand. Only then did he unbuckle his satchel, revealing bundles wrapped in linen and tied with vine.

He unpacked with the care of a man tending seedlings: a twist of bark, a handful of dried fern, something green and glossy as new clover. He placed a pinch of each into the steaming bowl and stirred with a stick carved into the shape of a heron’s beak.

Ulga sniffed. “What in the Nine Roots is that smell?”

“Forest tea,” said Barod, seating himself slowly on a creaky stool. “Pine for clarity. Mint to wake the breath. Willowroot for sore bellies and bad tempers.”

He held up a chunk of brittle wood. “This here—Willowroot bark. Good for fevers. Tastes like the underside of a boot, but it’ll set your liver straight.”

Ulga leaned over, sniffed again, and wrinkled her nose. “You drink that or paint fences with it?”

Barod chuckled. “Both, depending on the day.”

She raised her knife, still dripping with apple juice. “And that green bit?”

“Laughing Fern,” he said. “Makes chickens lay twice as many eggs, but don’t give it to a goat unless you want it singing.”

“And the mushroom?” she asked, nodding toward a hard lump like petrified bread.

“Stonecap,” he said gravely. “Boil it wrong and it’ll crack your molars. Boil it right, and it’ll make a soldier sleep for two days and dream of summers he’s never had.”

Ulga blinked, then said nothing more as she turned back to her pot. Barod sipped from the bowl, eyes closed, breathing steam like prayer. He rubbed an oil into the knuckles of his hands—hands worn from planting and pulling, not swinging blades. Then he lit a pipe with bark-stripped tinder and began to hum. It wasn’t a song anyone recognized, but it stirred something deep—a sound like wind through branches on a quiet path.

The tavern had grown still again, except for the faint tapping of rain and the soft lapping of a fox at rest. And Bilo, from behind the counter, leaned on his elbows and said, “Well, I’ll be thrice toasted and rolled in barley. We’ve got a talking tree in boots.”

Barod only smiled and kept humming.

The rain still whispered against the windows when Ulga returned to the taproom, hands dusted in flour, apron damp from morning prep. The tavern smelled of baked oats, woodsmoke, and boiled apple rinds. Barod still sat at his corner table, the fox curled at his feet like a living hearthrug, both unmoving but wide-eyed. In front of him was a tome unlike any she'd seen—its cover was bark, its binding vine, and between its pages were flattened leaves, petals, feathers, and one sprig of what looked like dried lavender.

Ulga, curious despite herself, refilled the kettle and brought him a new bowl of hot water. She said nothing, just raised an eyebrow at the odd bundle of pressed forest crumblings.

Barod gave her a grateful smile that crinkled all the lines in his face. "You're kind, miss. And for that, you'll be punished with a tale."

She smirked. "I'll risk it."

He closed the book gently and held one wrinkled hand over the rising steam. "Let me tell you of Mudfoot the Boar, my first friend in the forest. He taught me more than any man ever did—and never once said a word."

Ulga settled onto a nearby stool with a practiced grunt, listening as she sliced apples into a tin bowl.

"Years back," Barod began, voice softened by memory, "I had just left the city. I was nothing but sore hands and blistered feet, trying to live off acorns and moss stew. I'd never slept under a pine that didn't drip rain straight down my neck. I was trying to start a fire under a damp lean-to, shivering, miserable, and certain I'd die wet and cold."

He took a slow breath, smiling faintly. "Then I heard him. Heavy steps, the sound of roots tearing and leaves parting, and suddenly there he was—a great beast of a boar, crusted in dried mud, scarred from tusk to tail. He snorted like a bellows and sniffed at my boots. I thought he'd gore me."

Ulga leaned forward slightly.

"But no," Barod said, chuckling. "He just sat. Like an old hound beside a tired man. I didn't know what to do, so I offered him some dried berries. He ate 'em, slow and careful. Then laid down next to my fireless fire, as if to say, 'You're doin' it wrong, but I'll wait.'"

The old man's hand drifted down to stroke the fox's fur, eyes still far off.

"After that, he came every week. Brought trouble sometimes—chased off wolves, once dragged a stolen sack of carrots to my door—but mostly he just listened. Sat there, snorting and twitching his ears, like he could smell my loneliness."

Ulga said, softer than before, "Did you name him?"

"I did," Barod nodded. "Mudfoot. Because he left his tracks all over my blankets and didn't care one bit."

“And he stayed?”

Barod smiled. “Until he didn’t. One day, he just didn’t come. That’s the way with forest friends. They choose you, not the other way around. And when it’s time, they go.”

He looked into his tea, letting the silence grow.

“Still dream of him, sometimes. Big old snort, eyes like river stones. He never spoke, but he always knew when I needed to hear nothing.”

Ulga said nothing for a while, then reached out and touched the bark-bound tome with one floury finger.

“You got more stories in there?”

Barod’s smile returned, slow and warm. “Oh, lass. I’ve got a forest.”

Barod leaned back in his chair, steam curling from his mug, fox napping at his boots. The morning crowd had trickled in around him—quiet miners, a peddler with a sack of spoons, a few sleepy travelers sipping thick oat-ale. Ilondra plucked a gentle chord on her lute nearby, the kind that didn’t interrupt but carried thoughts like leaves down a slow river. Ulga kept one eye on the eggs frying and one ear tilted toward Barod.

“I didn’t ask the forest to take me in,” he said, “but I stopped asking the world to fight me. That’s when things began to shift.”

He ran a thumb down the smooth bowl of his pipe and smiled into the wood grain of the table. “It started with a squirrel. Little fool wouldn’t stop chewing my roof beams. So one morning, I left out a clutch of cracked chestnuts and some sweet moss. Next day, the squirrel was back—but not chewing. Just sitting. Watching.”

A few heads turned toward him, curious. He went on.

“I began trading. Crushed salt clay for the deer. Dried berries for the raccoons. When the rains came, I’d pitch a canvas lean-to over the chicken coop, and in return, the birds—wild ones, mind—sheltered there and ate the beetles off my root cellar.”

Ulga set down a steaming bowl of barley stew in front of a customer, wiped her hands, and asked, “What’d they give you in return, then?”

Barod’s eyes twinkled.

“One morning, I laid out a circle of acorns and honey around the base of an old ash tree. I’d seen it split once in a storm but still standing proud. Just… felt right. The next day, my herb patch—lemongrass, burdock, and sweetroot—was weeded clean. Neat. Tidy. Every worm turned, but not a leaf harmed.”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice as though sharing a pact not spoken since.

“That’s when I knew. I’d been accepted. Not as master, not even as guest. Just… trusted.”

He sipped his tea again, the scent of pine drifting softly into the tavern's warm mix of hearth smoke and stewed onions.

"The badgers stopped digging beneath my floor. The owls began hooting when someone crossed the trail at night. A fox started leaving feathers—only the blue ones—outside my door."

Someone laughed from the corner. "What, you had birds bringing your mail, too?"

Barod chuckled. "Wouldn't've surprised me. But it wasn't magic. That's the thing. It was kindness returned. Always is."

He looked down at the fox curled beneath him, giving its tail a gentle tug.

"Mudfoot, bless his tusks, became my herald. If there was an orphaned badger kit, or a raven with a crooked wing, or a wolf with a limp and too much pride to ask for help, he'd lead them to me."

A hush settled, soft as dust.

"I made a promise," he said. "Never cut a living tree. Always greet the dawn. And in return… I was never alone. Even when no one else saw me."

He looked up then, and though his beard was gray and his hands worn, his eyes shone with green places and open skies.

"Trust, my dears. Not spells. Not runes. That's the oldest magic there is."

The pipe's glow dimmed as Barod leaned forward, his voice softer now, like moss creeping over stone. Rain still whispered against the windows of the Vicious Mole, and the scent of pine tea and pipe smoke wrapped the room in a cocoon of quiet. Thora wiped down a table nearby, slowing her work to listen.

"One spring," Barod began, "I noticed the frogs were coughing. Yes—frogs. Little hitching sounds in their throats like gravel in a wet boot. Then the deer stopped drinking from the east creek. The foxes circled the pools but never touched them. Even Mudfoot grunted low when he passed."

He tapped his fingers on the table like the ripple of water.

"I followed the current upstream, past the willow thickets and over the stone ledge, to where the creek thins and crawls through a hollow. That's where I found it."

He paused to relight his pipe, drawing slowly.

"Half-buried in the mud was a rusted trap—not for catching, no. This was a cage of iron teeth twisted inward. Some foul old thing, leaking a black tar from its seams into the soil. The stone beside it was cracked like a broken tooth, and everything downstream smelled like rot and old pitch."

Barod's voice lowered.

"I didn't know who set it. Or when. But I knew it didn't belong. Not in that place."

He rolled up his sleeve to show a jagged scar along his palm.

"I tried to lift it out, but the teeth were bound to the stone with rusted wire. I would've lost fingers if not for Quibble."

Someone near the bar blinked. "Quibble?"

Barod smiled. "A raccoon. Cleverer than half the men I've met. He fetched me a flat shale slab and helped me wedge it beneath the trap, using his little paws to pull the brambles aside. We pried it up together, and I diverted the creek around the hollow with a stone channel we built over two days."

He flexed his fingers slowly, eyes distant.

"Cut my hands bad. And the tar—something in it—made me fevered. Dreams like fire and coughing trees. I barely made it back to my hut. Collapsed in the moss with Quibble tugging at my cloak."

"And Mudfoot?" Ulga asked, setting down a hot crust of bread by his tea.

"Didn't leave my side," Barod said. "For six days. Drove off a mountain cat with his tusks. I woke to find him snoring beside me, and the garden replanted—neat rows of mint and root, berries tucked into the soil. The badgers had dug trenches. The squirrels left dried mushrooms in my cup."

He chuckled, eyes moist with memory.

"Even the foxes brought eggs that week. Soft ones, still warm."

He raised his mug in a quiet salute.

"I saved their water. They shared their medicine. That's the deal, you see. That's the pact."

And then, as if called by the telling, the small fox at his feet stirred and yawned, curling again like a living flame.

Barod's fingers ran along the edge of his cup, tracing the ring of warmth left by the steeped forest tea. A few regulars leaned closer now, chairs creaking. The fire in the Vicious Mole's hearth had burned down to a low red glow, just enough to give the room that gentle orange shimmer that made every story feel like a memory.

"Not every forest creature is delicate," Barod began. "Some come with a growl louder than a storm and paws like frying pans. That was Groln."

He puffed his pipe and exhaled a ribbon of smoke.

“First time I met him, I was returning from foraging, arms full of mushrooms and bark, and there he was—halfway through my doorframe. Just stuck. Snout first, rump waggling, making frustrated little grunts.”

The room chuckled gently. Ulga smirked as she poured more ale into a mug.

“I dropped everything and stared. He didn’t even look at me—just kept huffing and trying to pull forward. I suppose the scent of my honey stores had gotten the better of him.”

Barod shook his head fondly.

“Now, most folks might’ve grabbed a spear. Not me. I fetched the honeycomb—good golden stuff, oozing sweet—and I sat down a few paces behind him and cracked it open.”

The image alone drew smiles. Barod continued, eyes sparkling.

“Well, that bear backed out like he was being pulled by a fishhook. Turned, blinked at me, and snatched the honey with a noise somewhere between a snort and a purr. Sat his great hide down beside me and just ate.”

“Did you pet him?” someone called.

“Good heavens, no,” Barod said, amused. “He was no pet. But from that day on, Groln started showing up. Most days he kept his distance—watched me dig, watched me read. But I always left out honey scraps or berries. I think he liked my singing too, though he’d never admit it.”

Ulga leaned against the bar, interested. “Did he ever get in trouble?”

Barod’s face darkened slightly, thoughtful.

“Poachers came one autumn. Set iron snares near the birch grove—filthy things. I was tracking their scent when I found the traps... all crushed. Bent like tin. The men were long gone, but their trail told me enough.”

He gave a little sigh.

“I found fur and blood near the creek. Groln had met them first. He didn’t just break the traps—he made sure they’d never use them again. I scolded him when I saw the mess he left. Told him we needed peace, not fury.”

“And?” Bilo asked, pouring himself a refill.

“He sulked for a week,” Barod replied with a grin. “Didn’t come near the hut. Then one morning I found a fresh salmon—fat and shining, laid across my doorstep like a peace offering. I’d never seen one that big since.”

The tavern filled with quiet appreciation. Even Ilondra stopped tuning her lute to listen, a gentle smile on her lips.

“He wasn’t tame,” Barod said. “Just a neighbor. A big, furry, misunderstood neighbor who liked honey and hated poachers.”

Ulga chuckled. “Does he still visit?”

Barod’s expression turned soft.

“Only in dreams now,” he said. “But he’s still the loudest snore in the woods.”

Barod’s pipe crackled softly as he refilled it with a pinch of dried nettleleaf, the herbal scent curling upward in slow spirals. Rain still tapped the tavern windows like distant drums, and the room sat wrapped in a hush that stories often bring. The old druid leaned back on the bench, stretching his knees with a grunt and resting a hand on the fox curled at his feet.

“Now,” he said, smiling beneath his beard, “let me tell you about the hedgehogs.”

Ulga blinked. “Hedgehogs?”

“Oh yes. A whole litter. Found ’em one frostbitten dusk huddled under a rotted leaf near my path—just five spiny lumps, shivering like lantern flames. No mother in sight. Not a chirp, not a rustle. I reckon she’d been taken by an owl or fox.”

He held up his hands, palms lined with years of bark and fire, and mimed wrapping them close.

“I tucked ’em in my cloak, pressed ’em to my ribs, and talked nonsense to keep them awake. I remember whispering lullabies to beetle-backed babes with barely a breath left.”

The fox at his feet let out a small sigh, as if remembering too.

“That night, I built a nest from linen and dried reeds, right beside the hearth. For weeks I mashed berries and boiled roots for them. They grew fast, faster than I thought, and by winter’s end, they had a burrow under my hut’s floor.”

The tavern’s warmth clung to the tale like honey to a spoon.

“That spring, something strange happened,” Barod continued. “My garden—normally modest—burst into bloom. Every stalk grew twice its usual height. Tomatoes like apples, squash like boulders. I thought it was chance. But then I started noticing something odd.”

He leaned forward now, voice lowering like a breeze before thunder.

“No slugs. No beetles chewing leaves. No larvae in the cabbages. None.”

He tapped his knuckles on the table, grinning.

“One night, I followed a trail of tiny pawprints. They crisscrossed the garden in neat lines. Little thorny shadows, working in silence, dragging grubs and bugs into piles far from my crops. A whole network of the spiny little folk—descendants of that first rescued brood, I suspect—keeping the land clean.”

The regulars listened wide-eyed. A gnome at the end of the bar murmured something about wanting to train a hedgehog brigade.

“They didn’t know they were saving me,” Barod said, chuckling. “They just remembered warmth.”

He looked around, eyes gentle, voice slow and kind.

“Trust is the most fertile seed you can plant in wild soil. You feed it once, and it grows back tenfold. Not just in roots or fruit—but in company. In care.”

He tapped his chest. “Everything’s smaller when it’s shared, even hunger. Even cold.”

The fire cracked, the rain softened, and for a breathless moment, it felt like the forest had come in from the storm and sat down among the mugs and the laughter.

Barod’s smile faded like morning mist, and the fox at his feet shifted, sensing the turn in the tale. He reached for his tea, now cold, and sipped it anyway, staring into the clay cup as though it held smoke from years past.

“It wasn’t always quiet in my woods,” he began. “There came a time—years after Mudfoot first wandered into my camp—when men came, not with stories or songs, but with axes and fire.”

The rain outside softened to a whisper, as if leaning in to listen.

“They were loggers,” Barod said. “Strong-backed, loud-tongued, laughing over their own noise. Five of them, with dogs and saws. They came saying they needed good timber and game to feed their camps. I warned them. I told them the forest would give only what it wished, and no more.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, weary.

“They laughed. Called me ‘leaf-beard’ and ‘old mushroom.’ And then they lit fire in the Singing Grove.”

Someone near the hearth murmured, but Ulga hushed them.

“Singing pines,” Barod said, voice distant. “Trees older than any town I’ve known. Their needles catch wind in such a way it sounds like flutes in prayer. It was a sacred place. Not just to me, but to all who had ears.”

He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “But the loggers wanted game. So they torched the dry grove to flush out the rabbits. The flames caught fast—too fast. Wind turned on them like a kicked dog.”

Barod leaned forward, hands clenched on the table.

“I tried to stop it. Ran barefoot through brambles with buckets. My fox bit at the dogs to drive them off. And then Mudfoot… Mudfoot came from the hills. Older, scarred, but still strong.

He charged through the smoke like a thunderhoof, stamping down the fire lines, snorting soot."

He paused. "We saved my hut. But the Singing Grove… we couldn't save that. The air was thick with ash and song gone silent. Birds never returned. The crickets fell quiet for weeks. Even the raccoons hid."

He lifted his eyes at last. "We buried our friends in earth and memory. The owls that warned me. The rabbits who thumped alarm. A foxling that never made it back. I planted new saplings—but some songs don't grow back."

There was a silence at the table now, heavy as wet bark.

"And the loggers?" Ulga asked gently.

Barod met her eyes, then looked away. "I don't speak of them. But the trees remember."

No one pressed further. The fire crackled. The fox curled tighter. And for a moment, the tavern was as still as the grove before the flames.

The tale settled over the tavern like dew at dawn, soft and silent. Barod sipped his fresh cup of pine-mint tea, steam curling past the lines of his weathered face. He leaned back, and the firelight caught the edge of his smile, faint as the first green bud on a branch.

"The spring after the fire was a lean one," he said, voice low but steady. "Cold, slow to wake. The snow clung longer than usual, and some nights I still heard the crack of burnt trunks settling into themselves. But then…"

He reached into his satchel and pulled out a small wreath of woven twigs and acorns, faded but whole. He set it gently on the table. "These," he said, tapping a cracked acorn cap, "I kept from the old grove. Just in case."

He described planting them by hand, one at a time, while the fox circled the clearing and birds watched from blackened boughs. His fingers bled more than once in the cold soil, but he hummed as he worked—a song his mother once sang to seedlings in spring.

The forest responded in kind. Shoots broke through charcoal earth. Ivy crept back over stones. Bees, curious and cautious, returned to the streambanks. One day, he looked up and saw a pair of robins building in the same hollow tree that had somehow survived the blaze.

"I wept then," Barod admitted. "Not because it was perfect again. It wasn't. But because something had decided it was worth beginning again."

New faces came to his grove—a sleek family of otters, slipping through the stream like living laughter. A young buck with a notched ear, who stared long at the clearing from dusk's edge, as if measuring its safety.

"And Mudfoot?" someone asked.

Barod smiled faintly. “He wandered deeper after the fire. Never returned. But his prints showed up now and then, deep in the soft moss. I like to think he was watching, still.”

He took a long breath, let it out with the scent of moss and memory. “Hope,” he said, “isn’t something loud. It’s green. It’s patient. It pushes through cracks. Grows sideways if it has to. It remembers where it’s fallen—but it always reaches for the sun.”

Ulga, behind the bar, wiped her eyes on the hem of her apron. “We could learn from that,” she murmured.

And for a moment, all in the Vicious Mole sat still, listening not to words, but to something older and quieter—the sound of something healing, slow and sure. Like forest roots reaching, unseen, beneath the stone.

The tavern had grown quiet again, the kind of hush that settled when someone spoke not from memory, but from the marrow. Barod leaned forward, resting both hands on his tea mug, the fox now curled asleep beside his feet, chest rising slow and steady. Her red fur gleamed faintly in the firelight, ears twitching at distant sounds—yet utterly at peace.

“Most of the old lot are gone now,” Barod said, voice as soft as a mossbed. “Mudfoot, Groln, the hedgehogs… even Quibble the raccoon—he got into some mushrooms and never walked the same again. But she…” He looked down at the fox and smiled with his eyes. “She’s still with me.”

He reached to scratch behind her ear. She yawned, blinked once, then nestled closer against his boot.

“I found her as a kit. Left alone by the den. Eyes still closed, belly too round, cried like a bird. I fed her from a fingertip soaked in goat milk for weeks, till she could stand and sneeze without tipping over.”

Barod’s voice carried no pride, only warmth. “Now she knows my moods better than I do. When I ache, she licks my knuckles. When I brood, she whines and nudges me till I speak. And when I sing, she lays her head across my knee and listens like a priest at prayer.”

He paused, eyes distant. “We walk the woods together still. Check on the elder trees, watch if the bees return each spring. We eat roots and boiled bark when nothing sweeter grows. On warm days, we lay on sunlit stones and do nothing at all.”

“I sing to the birds,” he added, “and they sing back. And I know what you’re thinking, but that’s not magic. No one sings out there unless they’re welcome.”

Ulga slid him a plate of soft bread and cheese. He nodded in thanks but didn’t eat right away. Instead, he looked around the tavern and said gently, “I never had a wife. Never had children. But the forest… it’s family. It listens when I speak. It mourns when I mourn. And sometimes it gives me gifts I never asked for.”

Bilo was polishing a mug, his brow furrowed in thought. After a moment, he rumbled, “Maybe you’re the one who raised the forest.”

Barod chuckled and picked up his tea. “Maybe,” he said, eyes twinkling. “Maybe we raised each other.”

The fire crackled low in the hearth as Barod stood, joints creaking like the limbs of an old tree. His tea was long finished, the empty mug still warm to the touch. With slow, deliberate motion, he reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled forth a single, smooth acorn, its cap still intact, its shell a deep, oaken brown.

He placed it on the bar before Bilo. “This one’s for the next tree,” he said softly. “You never know when you’ll need one.”

The tavern held its breath, the moment thick with quiet reverence. Even the fox, now stretched and alert beside him, seemed to wait.

Barod looked around the room, his eyes moving from Ulga to Thora, then to Ilondra, who had stopped tuning her lute to listen, and finally to Bilo, who stood steady behind the counter.

“The world isn’t always kind,” Barod said, “but we can be. And sometimes, that’s enough.”

He touched the acorn once more before continuing, “Trust makes the roots grow deep. Friendship makes the storms bearable. And hope… hope is what you plant, even when you don’t know if the sun will shine.”

Ulga, moved beyond words, stepped forward and hugged him gently—just a brief embrace, warm and firm like loamy soil. “You’re welcome here always,” she whispered.

Bilo nodded, clearing his throat. “There’s always a drink for you here, old one. And a floor that won’t freeze your back.”

Barod smiled, brushing his fingers across the fox’s head as she wound between his legs. “The forest calls,” he said. “And I’d best answer before the moss grows on my boots.”

He turned, cloak rustling like falling leaves, and made his way to the door. Rain had stopped. The air outside smelled like wet stone and distant pine.

And when the door shut behind him, he left behind more than silence. He left the scent of herbs, the echo of a fox’s soft yip, the trace of a firelit smile, and on the bar—still sitting where he placed it—the promise of an acorn, waiting for soil, sun, and the quiet patience of new beginnings.

A few quiet, bright weeks passed in Mirthwood, the trees turning greener, the birds louder, the soil warmer underfoot. Behind the Vicious Mole, in a plot where old tools once rusted and weeds had made small kingdoms of their own, Bilo and Ulga planted Barod’s acorn.

Bilo dug the hole with a short-handled spade, mumbling about “blessed forest nuts” and “trees that better grow taller than a mug of ale.” Ulga placed the acorn in gently, covering it

with the same hands she kneaded dough and hauled stew pots with. They both stood back and regarded the freshly turned earth.

“Might be the smallest start to anything we’ve ever done,” Bilo muttered.

Ulga nodded, wiping her hands on her apron. “Aye. But that old man didn’t carry it halfway across the land for nothing.”

Later that afternoon, Bilo disappeared into the tavern cellar to check on his newest ale batch —a bold barley-black blend with roasted nuts and smoked honey. He dipped a mug into the tasting cask and took a long draught, then another.

“Just needs a touch more soul,” he slurred to the empty room, raising the mug to no one in particular before tripping over a coil of hose and stumbling backward into the stairs. His face collided with a step, he bounced once, then flopped like a sack of flour back into the cellar floorboards.

From above came Ulga’s voice: “Bilo! Did you fall down the bloody stairs again?”

There was a long silence, then Bilo’s voice drifted up between fits of laughter. “The ale’s perfect, Ulga! I just tried to hug it!”

Ulga stomped down with a broom in hand, half to check if he was breathing, half to swat the foolishness out of him. She found him lying on his back, covered in dust and giggling like a lad on his first mead.

“I swear on your beard,” she growled, “if you cracked that barrel, I’ll drown you in it!”

Meanwhile, outside, Mildok cursed as he carried two brimming chamber pots down the back alley. The wind changed, and he gagged.

“Damned fate,” he muttered. “Some folks get magic swords, I get piss buckets.” Still, he emptied them like he did every week, muttering about the weight of life and inevitability with the tone of a man who’d lost every argument with his own luck.

At the stables, Old Jank, the mute stablehand with arms like fenceposts and a face like a woodcut log, was trying to coax a mule named Bramble into accepting a feedbag. He whistled softly and gave the animal a friendly tap on the side.

Bramble answered with a sudden, powerful kick. Jank’s body lifted clean off the ground, hurtled six feet, and slammed against the stable wall with a dull “whumph.”

From the kitchen window, Ulga shouted, “If you’re dead, Jank, I ain’t cleaning up after the mule!”

Back inside, the tavern smelled of yeast and herbs. Ulga kneaded dough with practiced hands while Thora chopped onions and tried to stifle tears that weren’t all from the onions.

“You ever think of opening a bakery?” Thora asked.

Ulga snorted. “I open my mouth every day and feed half the town. What more’s a bakery than that?”

Ilondra, sleeves rolled up, stood at the sink peeling potatoes, the flute tucked in her belt. She hummed as she worked, pausing to hum a harmony with Thora’s chopping rhythm. When not at her lute, her hands had found work easily among the pots and greens, and the tavern’s back garden had never looked greener.

She lifted a potato to inspect her peeling. “In Willow Vale, they say a good potato's like a kind song—simple, earthy, and better with butter.”

Bilo reemerged from the cellar, shirt torn at the shoulder, one eye pinked and wild with leftover laughter. “I just tasted greatness,” he bellowed, staggering toward the kitchen. “Someone catch me—I think I’m drunk with purpose!”

Ulga hurled a crust of old bread at him. “You’re drunk with stupidity!”

The tavern roared with life, like it always did, with its cast of fools, friends, and forgotten heroes—all held together by mugs, music, and the quiet magic of shared labor.

The Noble

Sir Thaddabus Hillblossom IV sat with the elegance of someone who had never chopped wood, milked a goat, or lifted anything heavier than a silver ledger. The raincoat on his shoulders glistened faintly with embroidery—small gold leaves running along the trim—and his waistcoat sparkled with polished lapis buttons, catching the hearthlight each time he lifted his wineglass.

“Ah, yes,” he said, inhaling the aroma from his goblet with a flutter of his lashes, “plummy, with a whisper of oak and… is that blackberry? Or perhaps a bold blackcurrant? Bilo, you old alchemist, what spell did you trap in this bottle?”

Bilo just smirked, polishing a mug with the heel of his palm. “Left it in a dusty cask for fifteen winters, forgot about it, and found it last month behind the pickles.”

Thaddabus laughed richly, as if Bilo had delivered the punchline at the opera. “Delightful! Utterly delightful! Let that be a lesson in aging—forgetfulness improves everything.”

He turned to Ilondra, who had wandered near to listen, and bowed with a flourish. “My lady bard, perhaps later, a tune? Something courtly and tragic with at least three mentions of betrayal and doomed romance?”

Ilondra raised an eyebrow, amused. “I’ve one about a goat who fell in love with a windmill. Tragic enough?”

“Only if the windmill loved him back,” Thaddabus replied with mock solemnity.

Ulga emerged from the kitchen with the requested roast—steam trailing from the carved rosemary-encrusted crust, the center tender and glistening.

“Goodness!” Thaddabus gasped. “This beast must’ve been raised on velvet and flattery!”

He carved a slice with the delicate precision of a jeweler inspecting a gem, took a bite, closed his eyes, and sighed. “Exquisite. If heaven has teeth, it surely chews like this.”

He chatted endlessly, switching topics from grain tariffs to temple politics, from the scandal of Duke Felworth’s second daughter eloping with a lute-player to the price of silks doubling since the flood near Eastmere.

Bilo tolerated him with a grin, pouring wine slowly and watching each coin the halfling slipped across the bar.

“And you know, my estate in Hollowshade?” Thaddabus said between bites. “The one with the five-tier garden and that insufferable peacock that bites guests?”

“No,” Bilo replied, “and I’d like to keep it that way.”

Thaddabus winked. “Then I shall make it your burden to know.”

The tavern buzzed softly around him—Ilondra’s quiet chords from the corner, Mildok grumbling over firewood, and Jank softly whistling as he scrubbed mule dung from his boots. But none of it interrupted the sheer glow of self-importance radiating from Sir Thaddabus Hillblossom IV, who drank deeply, dined grandly, and carried himself like every stool in the tavern had been carved for him alone.

“Tomorrow,” he announced with grandeur, “I shall tell you the tale of how I outdueled a baron, a hedge wizard, and a jealous husband—all in the same week. But tonight—tonight we eat!”

And with that, he clinked his glass to no one in particular and took another bite of roast, bliss radiating from every bite.

The tavern glowed warm and golden, the hearthfire crackling as Thaddabus leaned back in his seat, one polished boot propped on a low stool. His goblet never emptied, thanks to Bilo’s measured pours, and with every refill, his tales grew glossier, his grin more indulgent.

“Now then,” he declared, thumbing a crumb from his waistcoat, “did I ever tell you about my summer estate in Eastvale? The air there is so clean, even the birds sound better. I’ve a pond full of silver carp—decorative, mind you. Wouldn’t dare eat them. They’re named.”

He counted them off on his fingers. “Glittertail, Lord Scales, Peony, Bitey, and the rest—I forget, but they know me.”

A murmur of amusement passed among the patrons. Thaddabus swirled his wine, watching it like a fortune-teller reading the future.

“I have five inns, did I mention? Five. All run smoothly, all turning profit. I’ve a steward who manages them, poor fellow. I gave him a ring once just for keeping the barley suppliers honest. Real jade, not that colored glass rubbish.”

Ulga passed behind him, placing down bowls of stew at a nearby table. “Sounds like someone’s got more coin than sense,” she muttered.

“Indeed, madam,” Thaddabus beamed. “I was born with both and found more of each along the way.”

Bilo leaned against the bar, arms folded. “That vineyard you mentioned—what wine does it make?”

“Ah!” Thaddabus lifted his glass with pride. “A fine silver grape bred in the hills, kissed by morning fog. Smooth, complex, with notes of plum, almond, and ambition. I call it ‘Hillblossom’s Gilded Kiss.’ Limited to two barrels a year. I auction them. Always a spectacle.”

He glanced about as though expecting applause. A few travelers nodded, half-impressed, half-drowsy from their own drink.

“I don’t drink it every night because I must,” he said with a wink. “I do it because I can. Life’s too short for bland cheese and sour ale.”

From the corner, Ilondra chuckled softly. “And what happens when the wine runs dry?”

Thaddabus raised a brow, smiling. “Then I import more. From further. At greater cost. Or better still—I plant another vineyard.”

He leaned closer, lowering his voice like sharing a treasured secret. “I don’t chase riches, you see. I court them. Like a fine lady. And let them come to me.”

Bilo grunted, raising his own mug. “Some folk collect stones. You collect what—land?”

Thaddabus pointed with a playful jab of his finger. “Opportunity, dear Bilo. I collect opportunity. And dress it in velvet when it arrives.”

Outside, rain tapped gently against the windows. Inside, coins clinked, laughter spread, and Thaddabus Hillblossom IV held court like a pint-sized king on a throne of oak and ego, his stories flowing smoother than the wine in his glass.

The tavern had quieted slightly, the fire casting long shadows as Thaddabus reclined into his second bottle, voice mellowing with memory. He tilted his goblet gently, watching the wine cling to the glass like slow-moving syrup.

“My grandfather,” he began, “Osric Hillblossom—may the heavens bless his bite—was a merchant of the old cloth. Not the kind who sold you silk and bowed low. No, Osric could haggle a monk out of his robes and then sell them back doubled and dyed.”

Bilo raised a brow, pouring another measure of the red. “Sounds like a charmer.”

“He was,” Thaddabus nodded. “Sharp tongue, sharper eye. Built our name from three sheep, a mule, and a wagon of spoiled apples. Sold the wool to northern traders, used the apples for cider, and the mule—well, it pulled wagons for twenty years and kicked three thieves in the gut.”

Ilondra, listening from near the hearth with her lute idle in her lap, smiled softly. “A mule with sense. Rare thing.”

“Indeed,” Thaddabus chuckled. “By the time I came of age, Osric had parlayed wool and wit into vineyards, toll rights, and more tenants than he remembered. He ran five ledgers in his head, dictated contracts by candlelight, and never trusted a bank more than his own cellar.”

His expression softened, eyes lowering to the polished rim of his cup.

“I was twenty-one when he passed. Left me everything—lands, ledgers, expectations wrapped in red wax and ribbon. Vaults so full the gold sweated in the summer.”

Ulga, passing with a fresh tray, grunted. “Sounds like a blessing too big to carry.”

Thaddabus gave her a look that was half grin, half ghost. “It was. And it is.”

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, swirling what little wine remained in his glass.

“I never wanted again. Not for food. Not for fire. Not even for silk underclothes. But…”

He let the words rest a moment in the air, heavy like a fog about to break.

“But there are days I’d trade every coin, every deed, every vineyard and theatre and little gold-trimmed fork—just to hear him tell a tale again. Just one. About how he sold wool to frost giants in the high pass. Or how he once drank a dwarven brewer under the table and woke up with a goat tied to his boot.”

He smiled faintly, eyes fixed somewhere deep behind the fire’s flicker.

“He was loud, and selfish, and too clever for his own good. But by the gods, he made life feel big.”

Bilo gave a small nod, setting down a clean glass near the halfling. “Sounds like he passed you more than silver.”

Thaddabus raised his cup, now empty. “Aye. He passed me the storm that made him.”

And for a moment, the polished boots and velvet vest meant less than the wistful quiver in his voice, as a grandson toasted a memory greater than any inheritance.

Thaddabus leaned back in his chair, his waistcoat gleaming under the firelight, a stray curl of his chestnut hair catching on his temple. He steepled his fingers, gazing at the rafters as if watching chandeliers sway above them.

“Imagine,” he began, “a ballroom so wide it has its own echo—where violins fill the marble and laughter rings like coins dropped on polished stone. Guests in feathered masks and sapphire rings. Laughter like it’s scripted by poets. That’s a Tuesday evening at Hillblossom Manor.”

He chuckled, though his voice carried no heat.

“Every hall has a runner, every room a servant who steps aside when you pass, nods without needing your name. I once had a gardener compose an ode to my topiary maze—‘The Winding Bloom of Hillblossom’s Heart.’ It rhymed poorly, but the hedges looked marvelous.”

Bilo raised a brow. “And you liked all that?”

“Oh, I adored it,” Thaddabus replied with flair. “Duels of wit at breakfast. Ten-course meals you forgot halfway through. Silk slippers for walking on imported carpet. I once fell asleep in a bath poured from melted snow brought down from the Frostbarrows.”

He laughed, genuinely now, shaking his head. “And my bed—by the gods, the thing’s softer than repentance. Goose feathers from across the sea. Sheets spun by monks who chant as they weave.”

Ilondra nearby let out a quiet snort of amusement, and Ulga muttered, “I’ll stick to straw and a warm brick, thanks.”

Thaddabus grinned wide. “I have a spoon, a proper silver one, carved into my own face. Took three artisans and a letter from the Guild of Miniature Metalworkers. Looks smug, even in porridge.”

He paused to sip, though his cup was dry. He didn’t seem to notice.

“There’s a tower room in the east wing I’ve never slept in. A conservatory with birds that mimic only flattery. A hall painted with scenes of my father’s triumphs—though he mostly napped through them.”

Bilo leaned forward slightly. “So why not stay there, then? If it’s all so perfect?”

For a moment, Thaddabus’s smile held—but faded, like candlelight reaching the bottom of its wick. He looked down at his fingers, running them over the wineglass stem.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Maybe because all that grandeur... it doesn’t talk back. It doesn’t spill ale on your sleeve or sing out of tune near the fire.”

He looked around the Vicious Mole—the mismatched mugs, the crooked lanterns, the murmur of real folk playing dice and swapping tales.

“I guess I like it where the floorboards creak and the air smells like stew. Where someone might remember your name not because it’s stitched into your cuff—but because they liked how you laughed.”

Bilo nodded slowly. “Ain’t soft sheets that keep a man warm. It’s the noise around the fire.”

Thaddabus smiled again, this time not with showmanship—but with something quiet and real.

“Then pour me another,” he said, setting his coin down. “And let’s see what warmth tastes like tonight.”

Thaddabus turned his empty wineglass slowly between his fingers, the firelight glinting off its rim like a tiny crown. His voice, once full of the pomp of estates and silk-lined halls, had dipped low—like someone speaking more to themselves than to the room.

“All that wealth,” he said, almost in a whisper, “and yet the chair across from mine stays empty.”

Bilo paused mid-polish, eyes narrowing just slightly. Ilondra, seated near the hearth, plucked her lute strings gently, letting her melody dim to a hush.

Thaddabus leaned back with a sigh, the rich fabric of his waistcoat creasing like velvet curtains drawn too tight. “I threw a birthday feast once—two hundred guests. Roast peacock, golden pears, a quartet from Tarsfield who played songs only nobles know. The wine came in by the cart. Laughter echoed like bells.”

He chuckled bitterly. “And yet, when the candles guttered and the fires burned low, not a soul remained. The servants swept the halls and I walked past empty coats on empty chairs. I’d paid for every face I saw, every smile on borrowed coin.”

He looked to the rafters, as though a ghost of a memory might be hiding up there in the smoky beams. “No one stayed to ask how I was. No one stayed to say goodnight.”

He raised his hand as if to dismiss the thought, but it trembled before falling quietly back to the table.

“I’m not a man to them,” he said. “I’m an event. A holiday. A purse that laughs.”

His lips quirked in a mockery of a smile. “I’ve never had a friend whose wage I didn’t sign. Never had a letter that didn’t come with a request. Not one.”

Ulga, standing behind the bar with a ladle in hand, slowed her stirring. She didn’t speak, but her eyes lingered on him with the weight of understanding.

Thaddabus went on, more gently now. “I’ve kissed women whose names I don’t remember. Been praised by men who couldn’t pick me out of a lineup once the wine ran dry. You’d be amazed how many things you can buy with gold. But not that knock on the door that comes just because they missed you.”

Bilo put down his rag and refilled the halfling’s glass, not asking. “Aye,” the dwarf said. “We get plenty of folk through this place. Some loud, some proud. But I remember the ones who just wanted to sit near the fire.”

Thaddabus stared into the glass, then took a long sip. The wine was still fine, but it didn’t lift his shoulders.

“Tonight,” he said, quietly, “I’m glad the chair across from me’s empty for a different reason. Because no one needs anything from me here. And that… that feels like a gift.”

Thaddabus swirled the wine again, but didn’t drink it. His eyes stared down into the crimson liquid as though searching for something lost at the bottom of the glass. The lute music in the tavern had quieted, and only the low murmur of a dice game and the crackle of the hearth broke the hush.

“I’ve tried, you know,” he said, voice softer than velvet. “To find something real beneath all the shine.”

Bilo raised a brow but said nothing, wiping down a mug with slow, steady circles.

“There was a poet once. Lady Enresa. Hair like raven-silk and words sweeter than any pastry my chef could conjure. She wrote verses about my vineyards, compared my wine to the dreams of the moon. But when I asked if she remembered the color of my eyes…” He paused, face curling in a half-smile, half-sneer. “She said she never looked. Said it ruined the mystery.”

He shook his head, laughed once without mirth. “Another time, a noble widow. Elegant, charming, claimed to love me. Demanded a dowry that could fund a war campaign. Promised me loyalty, but not affection. I suppose she saw my heart as another asset—something to lock up behind a gate.”

He leaned back, boots crossing at the ankle, his voice drifting now like smoke. “I sent letters. Flowers from the Amber Coast. A bard once sang outside a lady’s window all night for me. I watched from the shadows, hoping she’d be moved. She tossed down a chamber pot.”

Ilondra chuckled faintly from her stool, but Thaddabus did not.

“Sometimes I wonder,” he mused, “if I wear my loneliness like a perfume. Rich folk always smell of something, don’t they?”

Bilo grunted. “Aye. Sometimes it’s money. Sometimes it’s rot.”

Thaddabus nodded, more to himself than to anyone else. “You’d think love would be easier with gold in your pockets. That it’d come on gilded wings, bearing roses and soft promises.”

He stared off, eyes glazed. “But my heart, it seems, isn’t priced for the market.”

He sipped his wine then, finally, but only a drop. The taste seemed bitter now, like something steeped too long in disappointment.

Thaddabus swirled the last of the wine in his glass, the deep red catching the firelight as he spoke, voice dipped in wistfulness. “There’s a room in my estate I never show to guests. No velvet drapes, no gilded chairs. Just walls—tall, clean, silver-polished mirrors. All four sides.”

He leaned back, glancing toward the window as if picturing it from memory. “No furniture. No decorations. Nothing but myself and my many faces. It was my grandfather’s idea, you know. He called it the Reflection Hall. ‘A man should know the weight of his own presence,’ he used to say.”

Bilo leaned back, wiping the rim of a mug dry, and said with a thoughtful grunt, “Reminds me of that druid Barod and his fox—now there was a bond. That fox had more honest company than I’ve known in years.”

Ilondra plucked at her lute in a minor key, the gentle hum filling the silence that followed.

“I go there when I feel lost,” Thaddabus continued. “When the parties echo hollow and even the clink of coin sounds lonely. I’ve watched my smile in those mirrors lose its luster over the years. Watched fine collars and pearl cuffs begin to feel like shackles. Even the finest lace can’t warm cold shoulders.”

Bilo polished a mug slowly, then spoke with the calm weight of someone who’s seen many truths poured over a counter. “Ever think of starting fresh?”

Thaddabus exhaled through his nose, a sound too tired to be a laugh. “Every day. But it’s hard to leave a palace, even when the halls are empty. I built it too tall. Now I can’t see what’s beyond the walls.”

He looked down into his cup, now empty. “What’s the price of a second chance?” he asked quietly.

Bilo didn’t answer right away. The fire cracked. A pair of dice clattered from across the room. Finally, the dwarf said, “Maybe less than the price of staying the same.”

Thaddabus nodded slowly, his fingers idly tracing the rim of his glass, as if weighing invisible coins of thought.

Thaddabus leans his elbow on the table, staring into his wine like it held the past. “When I was a lad, before the ledgers and the liveried servants, I used to sneak off with jam tarts in my coat and sit by the river. Got into scraps over marbles, skinned my knees chasing dragonflies.” He laughs softly, not quite with joy. “There was a girl then—Fillo. No shoes, wild curls, full of the kind of lies that made the world more fun. We ran those woods like lords of dirt and daydream.”

He pauses, fingers drumming the side of his glass.

“One day, I stopped showing up. Grandfather died, the gold came, and I was dragged into a new world where days wore cravats and nights locked their laughter in vaults.” His voice dips to a whisper. “I never said goodbye. Just vanished into the velvet.”

He glances toward the fire. “I wonder if she remembers me. I wonder if anyone does.”

Ulga, scrubbing a tray nearby, glances up and says gently, “Maybe it’s not too late.”

Thaddabus smiles, not proudly, not bitterly—just quiet and small. “Maybe,” he says, “maybe it isn’t.”

Thaddabus swirled the last of his wine and stared through it like it held stars. “I wake up most nights around the second bell. Big marble chamber, all quiet except the fire snapping and that damned clock ticking like it’s judging me.” He chuckled bitterly. “There’s warmth, aye—fine wool, velvet blankets, logs as thick as my thigh. But it’s the coldest room in the world some nights.”

He leaned back, eyes half-lidded. “My halls are lined with paintings—my father, his father, their triumphs in brush and gilt. But when I pass them, I feel like I’m haunting someone else’s home. Their eyes never blink. Mine do, just to make sure I’m still there.”

He folded his hands on the table. “Sometimes I wonder if I was never meant for all this. I was a better man with scraped knees and no silver spoon in my mouth. Happiness was simpler. A crust of bread, a friend to share it with.”

He tapped his chest with a single finger. “Now it’s all coin and contract. The gold keeps people away. Too wide a moat. And no one’s built a bridge.”

Bilo, wiping a mug dry, finally broke the silence. “Gold can keep you alive,” he said. “But only love can keep you company.”

Thaddabus didn’t speak. Just nodded slowly, and the room held him like a breath not yet let go.

Thaddabus tilted his glass, watching the last ribbon of wine catch the lantern light like a fading sunset. He took the final sip slowly, as if trying to taste more than just the drink. “This wine’s the best I’ve had in years,” he murmured, setting the glass down with a gentle touch. “But it tastes better here.”

His eyes wandered over the room—patrons with dirt under their nails and scars on their hands, voices sharing stories between mouthfuls of stew and gulps of ale. Laughter rose from a corner where dice clattered, and Ilondra’s lute drifted like a warm wind from the hearth. The corner of his mouth lifted. Something in his posture shifted, the pride folding into peace.

“Maybe I’ll come back next week,” he said, almost to himself. “Maybe I’ll bring a bottle. Not to impress anyone. Just to share.”

He stood, brushing crumbs from his lapel, and tipped his hat toward the bar. “If ever you need land for gardens or goats, say the word. I’ve more than I can tend—and I’d like to give something real for once.”

Bilo gave him a slow, approving nod. Ulga folded her arms, gave a half-smile, and replied, “You bring the bottle. We’ll bring the bread.”

Thaddabus smiled wider than he had all evening, then turned and walked out into the cool dark, his polished boots clacking less like boast and more like thought. The door closed behind him with a soft wooden sigh.

For a long moment, the tavern held its breath. Then Ilondra’s tune rose again, and mugs clinked anew.

Ulga wiped her hands on her apron and watched the door. “Poor man’s never been hungry,” she said quietly. “But he’s starving.”

Morning broke over the cobbled streets of Mirthwood with a pale orange glow, and the tavern door creaked open just as the dew steamed from its hinges. Bilo and Ulga emerged side by side, coin pouches cinched tight and a short list scribbled in dwarven shorthand. The air smelled of chimney smoke, wet stone, and rising yeast from the early bakeries.

The market square was already stirring like a pot set to boil—stalls creaked under weight of goods, and merchants shouted with morning zeal. A pig squealed near a butcher’s block. Bells chimed on a spice-seller’s belt as she spun to show her wares. The breeze carried snippets of gossip and garlic alike.

First stop: sausages. A plump butcher named Rorik grinned at Bilo.

“Back for the blood links, are ye?”

“I’ll take a dozen, if you shave the price like you shave your jowls,” Bilo replied.

Rorik barked laughter. “Six copper a link.”

“Four.”

“Five and a pickled onion.”

“Done.”

They moved on. Ulga tugged Bilo’s arm toward a stall of rare vegetables—purple carrots, spotted peppers, and spiral-rooted tubers from the northern marshes.

“Six silver for a bushel,” said the wiry elf merchant, arms folded.

“Five, and you throw in that sorry-looking turnip with the face like my uncle.”

“Six, but I’ll toss in a twistroot for your trouble.”

Ulga grunted. “Fine. But we won’t smile.”

Barrels of goat milk followed—Ulga dipping her finger in to taste.

“Sour,” she said.

“That’s its charm,” said the seller.

“We’ll take two at half price and you won’t have to carry them home.”

He sighed and nodded.

Next, three wheels of nut-honey cheese. Bilo haggled with a halfling who claimed it aged in moonlight. “It aged in your basement,” Bilo retorted. “Three wheels for a silver or I start singing about your moldy toe.”

“Deal, but you’ll regret not tasting the rind.”

They added flour from a miller with flour-dusted ears—negotiated from three silvers to two and a copper after Ulga let him sniff her stew spice blend. He wept a little and begged for the recipe.

More purchases came swift and loud: fresh rosemary and white onions from a wide-hipped farmwife, six loaves of brown bread from a man missing three fingers, smoked eels wrapped in grass-leaf, boar ribs still red at the bone, jars of fermented cabbage, marinated olives, pickled beets, dried apricots, and a small bundle of rare blue mushrooms said to make stew taste like thunder.

They bought a roll of cured venison strips, a crate of apples that still smelled of orchard breeze, and a cask of blackberry wine from a caravan vendor who swore it was kissed by a moon priestess.

Each trade came with a tale, a jest, or a shrug. Coins passed hands, and so did gossip. A local gossip swore the mayor had gout and the baker's youngest daughter could whistle like a jaybird. A boy with a wooden sword fought imaginary beasts between the stalls. Bilo bought him a boiled egg.

By midmorning, their cart groaned with treasures. The sun had crested high, the square was crowded with shouts and laughter, and a busker played a crooked flute beside a blind man selling carved stones.

As they turned to leave, Ulga patted the side of the full cart and said, "That'll feed the Mole for two weeks."

Bilo lit his pipe, exhaled a ring of smoke into the blue sky, and nodded. "And keep the stories seasoned right."

Burgon's Law

The tavern door slams open, and in storms Burgon, towering, hunched, draped in grimy chainmail and furs. A horned helmet clatters with every stomp. He tosses his spear onto a table, nearly hitting a patron, then snarls, "Dont whine. Should duck faster." His shield bears a snake, painted over old bloodstains; his face is a lattice of scars, his grin a mockery. Burgon bellows for "ALE. STRONG. NOT THAT ELVEN PISS." As Bilo nervously fills the first mug, Burgon slaps a dwarf's stew to the floor and laughs when the dwarf backs off. "Fear's the right smell," he growls. "Means you know your place." Then he gulps down the ale in one setting.

The tavern froze for a moment as Burgon's presence soaked into the walls like smoke. Ilondra faltered on her lute, fingers still upon the strings. Mildok stepped out of view, broom in hand, muttering curses under his breath. Even Ulga narrowed her eyes, muscles stiff beneath her apron. The man was wide as a doorframe and twice as mean, his beard braided in tangles and blackened with soot. His boots left deep mud prints and the scent of wet iron followed him in like a ghost.

Bilo handed him another mug without a word, jaw set. Burgon seized it, sniffed once, then drank so deeply foam streamed from the corners of his mouth and into his beard. He slammed the empty cup down.

"Better," he said. "Almost makes this dungheap of a town tolerable."

When the stew-slapped dwarf—young, fair-bearded, still clutching his spoon—tried to pick up his overturned bowl, Burgon kicked it across the floor and snorted. “No seconds for sheep.”

The dwarf’s hand hovered over the fallen dish. His face burned red, but he said nothing.

Ulga moved from behind the bar with deliberate calm. “You pay for what you spill in this house,” she said, voice cold as cellar stone.

Burgon leaned his elbow on the table, grin gleaming like a rusted blade. “What if I spill more?”

Thora stepped beside her, arms folded, and behind them, Bilo simply stood still—pipe in one hand, the other curled under the bar, where the ironwood cudgel hung ready.

Then Ilondra began to play again—softly, delicately—an old lullaby, one that used to calm cattle and storm-tossed children alike. The strings carried through the tension like a breeze through wheat.

Burgon’s gaze drifted to her. “You play pretty. That for coin, or to stop me from tossing one of these goats through the window?”

Ilondra didn’t answer. She played on.

Burgon snorted. “Bah. Fine. I’ll sit. But this place better get louder, or I’ll make it so.”

He dragged over a bench, spilling it halfway, then reclined like a warlord. He slapped his hand onto the table.

“More ale. And meat. Big meat.”

Bilo nodded slowly, lips tight. “Coming right up,” he said, voice like a taut rope.

Behind the counter, Ulga muttered, “Beast is right. Let’s see if it feeds or bites.”

And with that, the tavern cautiously resumed its breath, waiting to see just how deep Burgon’s shadow might reach.

Burgon’s boots thudded across the wooden floor like war drums, scattering crumbs, scaring dogs under tables, and rattling mugs in their holders. He paced with a coiled aggression, eyeing patrons like prey in a pen. Each time someone tried to meet his gaze, he gave them a toothy smirk and slapped a mug to the floor.

“Is that what you drink? Pond piss?” he growled at a group of farmers. “I’ve bathed in stronger liquor!”

He pointed at a human lad in a patched coat. “You look soft. Real soft. I bet your bones whistle in the wind.”

The boy turned white and stared into his lap. Burgon spat.

A dwarf raised an eyebrow at that, muttering something under his breath. That was enough.

“Rust-gnawer!” Burgon bellowed. “Say it louder, beardrat!”

Before the dwarf could rise, a burly sailor at the next table—tan-skinned, wind-worn, and wide as a wagon—pushed back his chair and stood tall.

“That’s enough, beast,” the sailor said, cracking his knuckles. “You spill one more drink, I’ll spill your guts.”

Burgon grinned, stepping close with his horned helm glinting in the firelight.

“One head,” he whispered, and slammed his brow into the sailor’s nose with a crunch like a snapped branch. The man flew backward, crashing into a table, groaning and holding his face.

Burgon turned, raising both arms like a conquering champion. “WHO’S NEXT? COME ON! I’LL GIVE YOU ONE HIT—MAKE IT COUNT!”

No one moved. Several patrons gathered their cloaks and slipped out the door, muttering. Others sat stiff, eyes on their drinks, praying not to be noticed.

Bilo wiped his hands with a cloth and said nothing, his eyes sharp behind the bar. He didn’t flinch when Burgon stormed back and threw himself into a stool hard enough to creak the legs.

“Whole world’s soft,” Burgon muttered, punching the table. “Full of cowards. Thieves. Liars. No one fights straight. No one’s honest unless it’s with a fist.”

He slammed his fist on the counter. “More ale.”

Bilo poured wordlessly, setting down a brimming mug.

As Ilondra passed behind him, flute at her belt, Burgon grunted. “Play a note and I’ll snap that stick into splinters and feed it to your sheep.”

She kept walking, head high, never meeting his gaze.

Bilo set another mug down as the first emptied. Burgon drained it in one pull, smacked his lips, and sneered.

“Not bad,” he said. “Almost enough to make me forget I’m surrounded by featherweights.”

Behind the bar, Bilo began pouring faster now, like he was feeding fire just enough wood to keep it from burning the house down.

The mugs kept coming like a line of doomed soldiers. Burgon downed each one with savage cheer, foam dripping from his chin and soaking into the fur on his collar. Every swallow ended with a bellow, and every empty mug was slammed onto the bar with enough force to make nearby candles flicker.

“HA! That’s what ale’s supposed to taste like,” he roared, pounding the bar with his meaty fist. “Not those whispery elf-waters that smell like flowers and regret!”

Bilo, jaw tight, slid another mug across the counter. Burgon caught it mid-roll and drained it before Bilo could even exhale. The great brute wiped his mouth on his sleeve, smearing foam with a grin as wide as a boar’s back.

“DRINK, BEARDY!” he shouted, slamming his mug down again. “You call yourself a tavern-keeper? Then DRINK with me!”

Bilo sighed, grabbed his own mug—half-full with a mild dark brew—and raised it with as much dignity as he could summon. “To… customers who pay first,” he muttered, and drank.

Burgon bellowed with laughter. “THAT’S THE STUFF!”

Then, mid-sentence and mid-belch, the tavern was assaulted by the raw trumpet of a fart that shook the bar stools.

“Better out than dead!” Burgon hollered, slapping his thigh. “Elves die quiet. That’s why they’re dead so easy. Whisperin’ themselves into graves!”

A few patrons chuckled nervously from the shadows. Others kept staring into their mugs, hoping to disappear.

Burgon leaned forward, belly jiggling beneath his chainmail, and began to scratch it with a grimy dagger. The edge scraped metal and skin with equal roughness. Then, without warning, he jammed the blade down into the bar.

THUNK.

The point stuck fast in the old oak countertop, just inches from Bilo’s hand.

Bilo blinked once, then twice. “That’s… antique wood.”

Burgon grinned. “So’s my mother. Didn’t stop me kicking her out the window.”

Silence.

Then the brute leaned in, voice lower but no less dangerous. “You think peace works, dwarf? Nah. Peace is a shield with no arm. Makes folk soft. Makes ‘em think fences are stronger than fists.”

Bilo slowly turned, wiped his palms on his apron, and set down a platter of roasted pork. “You hungry?”

Burgon leaned back, snorted, waved a hand dismissively. “Pork’s fine when you’re dying. I want *porridge.* The cheap kind! Burnt if you got it! And bring a damn spoon—or don’t!”

Ulga’s voice echoed from the kitchen. “He gets one spoon. He breaks it, he uses his hands.”

Burgon grinned wider. “Deal!”

Bilo sighed and poured another mug. The avalanche was not over.

Burgon hunched over the steaming bowl of porridge like a beast guarding a carcass. He gripped the spoon in his fist the same way he might a hatchet, and plunged it into the mush with no grace, scooping up heaps and cramming them into his mouth. Oats flew. Steam hissed from his nostrils. He didn’t chew so much as churn the food into himself, snorting between mouthfuls, hot porridge clinging to his beard and chin.

“Ain’t about taste,” he grunted between gulps. “It’s *fuel*. Fight fuel. I eat to stay strong. You eat to stay soft.”

Bilo stood on the far side of the bar, arms folded, eyes narrowed. “Soft’s good for sleeping. And for not smashing spoons.”

Burgon belched. “I’ve had worse.”

Without warning, he held up the wooden spoon and looked at it like a memory had just leapt from the bowl. “Killed a man once with a bowl like this,” he said, mouth half-full. “Was in a prison out near Gorspine Ridge. Lad was smilin’ too much. I don’t trust smiles. Smashed it right into his face. Took three guards to pull me off ‘im.”

“Sounds... memorable,” Bilo muttered, trying to shift the air. “So. Weather’s been dry. Good for roads.”

Burgon squinted. “Weather?”

“Yeah, roads. Trade. Travel.”

The brute sneered, spoon scraping the bottom of the bowl like a blade on bone. “Everything’s road. Every breath you take is another step toward the grave. You either *bleed* on the road or *take* it from someone else.”

He licked the spoon clean, then tossed it onto the bar with a clatter. “My ma died when I was six. Fever. Didn’t even scream. Just stopped bein’ there. My pa got drunk the next week, whipped me for cryin’. So I killed him with his own belt when I was twelve.”

He grinned like someone retelling a campfire joke. “First kill. First lesson. If you don’t hit first, you’ll be the one beggin’. And I don’t beg.”

The tavern was quiet. Even the regulars near the back had gone still. Bilo, ever calm in a storm, only raised a brow.

“And what lesson did you learn today, then?” he asked.

Burgon wiped his mouth with the back of his hairy hand, leaned back, and stretched his arms.

“That most folk still flinch,” he said. “And some make decent porridge.”

He laughed, but it was an ugly sound—low, cracked, and full of ghosts.

Burgon slammed his mug down again, sloshing dark ale across the bar as he leaned forward, breath rank with meat and malt. His eyes, small and glittering beneath his heavy brow, scanned the tavern like a wolf looking for a limp.

“You know what’s wrong with the world?” he growled to no one in particular. “It’s full’a folk wearin’ masks made o’ grins. Smile at you with one hand behind their back, fingers twitchin’ for a blade or a purse string.”

He jabbed a finger into the bar, leaving a smear of grease. “People lie to stay warm. They steal just to feel clever. They hug you with one hand and rob your guts with the other. It ain’t a world for trust—it’s a world for knives.”

He swigged hard and set the mug down slower this time. His tone dipped low, turning from bark to something colder, sharper. “Joined a mercenary band once. Thought maybe fightin’ together meant somethin’. Slept in the same mud, bled on the same coin. We shared meat, fire… even jokes.”

His lip curled into something like a snarl. “Then the gold dried up. And so did the brotherhood. Left me in a swamp with an arrow in my back and a belly full o’ fever. Took me a week to crawl out. I found five of ’em. One by one. Taught ’em what it means to leave a beast wounded.”

The room was silent, frozen in his shadow. Ilondra had stopped playing. Even Ulga, back behind the curtain, paused her footsteps.

“Trust,” Burgon spat into the hearth, “is for corpses. Dead men never lie. That’s why I leave ’em honest.”

He leaned in toward Bilo then, close enough that the dwarf could smell the battlefield in his breath. “You’re scared, dwarf. And that’s smart. Fear keeps your beard uncut. It’s the clever ones that walk away.”

Bilo didn’t flinch, just stared back with the calm of a man who had faced worse than words.

Then Burgon reared up, grabbed his mug, and roared, “To knives! To fists! And the stink o’ blood! That’s life!”

He drank, lips slick with ale, and let out a long exhale through his nose like a bull after a charge. Around him, the tavern held its breath, and no one spoke. They simply watched, waiting, hoping the storm would blow past.

Burgon’s laughter broke through the tense quiet like a bone snapping under boot. He leaned back on his stool until it groaned, his voice booming through the rafters, thick with ale and pride.

“Y’ever seen a man’s face go soft under a stool, dwarf?” he barked, looking sideways at Bilo with a wide, cracked grin. “Not scream, not shout—just soft. Like dough. All because he looked at my porridge too long.”

He slammed the empty mug on the bar and waved for more, not waiting to be served before continuing.

“And taxes,” he growled. “Tried to shake me down in Varron’s Crossing once. Guard tower on the hill. Five men. Asked for coin I didn’t owe. So I owed ’em something else.”

He mimed striking a torch and letting it fall.

“Watched the flames from a hillside, warm as bathwater. Men yelling, steel clanging in smoke, and me with a slab of salted pork on a spit. They don’t charge ghosts tax, I figure.”

Bilo’s brow furrowed as he filled another mug, glancing to the side where Ilondra had quietly vanished behind the curtain. A few patrons were slinking away to corners, heads down, not daring to cough.

“I fought a captain once,” Burgon said, eyes now gleaming with the gleam of memory. “City guard, tall one, thick with pride and polish. Wanted to arrest me for... something.” He shrugged. “I forget. Didn’t matter. What mattered was sand. A handful. Right to the eyes. Then my knife to the throat. He never even drew his blade.”

“Honor,” he scoffed. “Honor’s just a word cowards hide behind. Steel don’t care what you believe. It cuts all the same.”

He took the fresh ale and swirled it in his hand, his voice lowering only slightly.

“Once I took down a whole caravan. Twelve men. One woman, one boy. All for a cloak. Red one. Silken. Fit me just right.”

He tapped the bar once, staring into his drink. “Still wear it on cold nights.”

Bilo didn’t reply. He stood still, hands on the oak counter, eyes steady. Around them, a hush had fallen. Only the crackle of the hearth and the wet gulp of Burgon’s drinking echoed through the room.

“You think evil’s rare?” Burgon sneered. “It’s everywhere. It’s you. It’s them. It’s me. Difference is—I don’t lie about it.”

He raised his mug, half-full now, and smiled a wolf’s smile.

“I’m just the honesty no one wants to meet.”

The tavern held its breath.

An elven traveler, pale and slender, had been inching toward the exit, hood drawn tight, a coin already clutched in his hand to leave quietly behind. But his foot clipped the back leg of Burgon’s stool. The scrape of wood on floor sounded like thunder.

Burgon's hand stopped mid-mug. His body turned slowly, like a loaded catapult creaking toward release.

The elf stammered an apology, hands raised, eyes wide. "My fault—I didn't mean—"

"Touch me again, twigman," Burgon growled, rising to his full, hulking height. "And I'll wear your ears as earrings."

The elf backed up. One step. Two. But too slow.

The half-orc's arm swung without warning—a mug spun through the air and cracked against the elf's temple, sending him stumbling sideways with a cry. Then came Burgon's lunge. The dagger, quick and low, thrust into the elf's gut and twisted once before pulling free.

A gasp burst from the room like a punch. Blood spattered across the floorboards in hot, arcing streaks. The elf collapsed, clutching his stomach, breath hitching, eyes wide with shock and confusion.

Screams rang out—patrons ducking under tables, some crawling, some leaping for the door. Ilondra dropped her flute with a clatter. Chairs tipped. A stew spilled into someone's lap, forgotten.

Bilo grabbed the cudgel beneath the bar, knuckles white. But he didn't move. Couldn't. The sight of the elf, gurgling and shuddering on the floor, froze him like winter's first breath.

Burgon turned, chest heaving, dagger dripping. He kicked over a table as if it were a footstool, dishes and mugs shattering. He looked around, wild-eyed, daring someone—anyone—to step forward.

Then he spat on the dying elf's chest.

"Told you all!" he roared, arms wide in bloody triumph. "This world's mine!"

And with that, he stomped to the door, threw it open with a crash, and walked into the night. No payment. No parting glance. Just the sound of chainmail, boots, and madness echoing into the dark.

The tavern stood still, broken and silent—only the dying moan of the elf whispering beneath the shock.

The tavern held its breath too long, and when it finally exhaled, the sound was more a whimper than a sigh.

Ulga was the first to move. Her apron hitched, she ran to the elf's side, pressing her hands to the wound, shaking her head even as she did. "No, no, no," she murmured. But the elf's eyes were already glassy, his breath gone before her knees touched the bloodstained floor.

The body lay still. Pooled red soaked into the grooves of the timber like spilled wine. A smear of it trailed behind Burgon's boots, leading out the door into the dark.

Behind the bar, Bilo slowly set the cudgel down. His hands were trembling. He reached for a cloth, found one soaked in ale, and tossed it aside. Found another. Wiped the counter absently, even though it was blood on the floor, not the wood in front of him, that haunted the air.

No one said anything for a long time. Just the ticking of the wall-clock. The soft crackle of the hearth. A dish clattered to the floor where someone had dropped it in shock, but even that seemed quiet.

Then a voice spoke, low and bitter: “Why didn’t anyone stop him?”

Another answered, just as quiet. “Because he was right. No one wanted to die today.”

Ilondra stood in the corner, her lute silent at her back, her lips parted like she might cry or sing, but chose neither.

Bilo finally whispered, more to himself than anyone else, “That bastard knew fear better than faith. And he used it like a hammer.”

Someone pulled a curtain closed over the broken door. Someone else gently covered the elf’s body with a cloak.

Outside, the night had gone back to being calm. The stars looked down with their usual distant indifference. But inside the Vicious Mole, the shadow of Burgon’s fury hung like smoke in the rafters—thick, clinging, impossible to wash out. Like blood in the cracks of old wood.

Bilo stormed up the stone steps to the guardhouse, breath huffing in white puffs, his beard flecked with sweat and ash. He shoved the door open with a grunt. “There’s been a killing in the Mole—an elf, gutted in front of half the tavern!” he barked. “The brute’s name’s Burgon. Big, scarred, half-orc, chainmail like a rotting curtain, face like a warhammer’s backside.”

The sergeant at the desk didn’t blink. “Burgon?” he said darkly. “That animal was just let loose from the dungeon this week. Something about a lack of witnesses in his last mess.”

Two guards leapt up immediately, tightening their belts and grabbing cudgels. “We’ll find him,” one growled, already on the move. “He won’t vanish twice.”

Back at the Vicious Mole, two others had already arrived. They nodded grimly to Ulga and Bilo, then quietly lifted the elf’s body onto a canvas stretcher. Without a word, they slid it into the back of a mule-drawn cart, the beast snorting, its hooves ringing a slow, sorrowful rhythm against the wet cobbles as it wheeled away into the night. Bilo and Ulga watched in silence, arms folded, the tavern's lanternlight flickering on their faces until the cart disappeared into shadow.

Inside, Ulga dropped to her knees with a bucket of steaming water, scrubbing the bloodstained floor with ash and a thick slab of boar-fat soap, each motion stiff and furious. Bilo, wobbling from the dozen mugs he had matched Burgon for, staggered out the back and

into the outhouse. A moment later, the sound of retching echoed over the quiet of the yard, mingling with the gentle hiss of falling rain.

Serela Dawnspark

Weeks passed, and the Vicious Mole fell back into its steady rhythm—days warmed by the scent of stews, and nights filled with songs and the gentle clink of silver on oak.

Each morning, Ulga rose before the sun, ladled thick onion soup into blackened pots, or boiled mutton bones into rich broth for barley stews. “Eat slow,” she’d tell the hungry, “or I’ll have to carry your bloated corpse out with the slop.” Visitors took her gruffness as part of the charm and left with full bellies and muttered thanks.

Ilondra sang daily in the evening light, her voice drifting through the rafters like mist through a forest, her lute weaving melodies as delicate as birdsong. Her tunes made tired travelers linger, made dwarves weep into their mugs without shame.

Bilo, ever watchful, poured ale with a grin and a quip. “Two mugs today, and your wife don’t have to know unless she drinks faster than you,” he’d tell a regular miner, slapping the froth-covered stein onto the bar. Silver flowed in—a coin at a time—each one keeping the Mole breathing, the hearth fed, and the barrels full.

Each month, Bilo handed out copper-stamped pay for the tavern hands—Jank the mute stablehand, Mildok the chamber pot boy, Thora the kitchen girl, and Ilondra, who sang instead of served. Their pay was humble, but the tavern fed them thrice a day, and none of them lacked a warm bed or a thick wool blanket come nightfall.

One golden-lit evening, the Vicious Mole brimmed with life. Word had spread—Ilondra was performing new songs, freshly written tales in tune. The tavern filled early. Bearded dwarves from the forestry camps stomped in, axes slung over shoulders, boots still caked with pine needles. Miners washed the coal off their hands, eager for warmth and cheer. Elves from the guild halls trickled in, quiet but expectant, their eyes reflecting firelight like river stones. Halflings from the market district brought laughter and pastries tucked in their pockets. Even a few nobles slipped in, including Thaddabus Hillblossom, freshly powdered and wearing a lapel of peacock blue.

As Ilondra took her place by the hearth, the tavern hushed. She began with a slow tune, the lute’s strings whispering like wind in the willows. Then she lifted her voice:

“Where river bends and oak trees lean,
A voice was born in silver green.
It sang of bread, and sow, and seed,
And whispered love to every weed…”

By the second verse, dwarves were already stomping their heavy boots in rhythm. Halflings clapped along. Elves tapped goblets to the beat, and Thaddabus raised his glass. “Exquisite!” he called. “That rhyme about the weed—she’s speaking of my gardener, surely!”

Bilo beamed behind the bar, sloshing mugs full of golden ale. “Drink faster, Thaddabus. Your gardener’s probably here tonight and might take offense.”

Wine and laughter flowed like spring floods. Patrons rose to dance, stomping in circles, slapping knees and spinning their partners. The timbers of the Mole groaned under the weight of joy. Jank whistled a fast trill as he passed a platter of roast turnips. Mildok grumbled over spilled mead but smiled when a halfling offered him a cherry tart.

Ulga stood at the kitchen door, arms crossed, a mug of her own in hand. “A good night,” she muttered. Bilo leaned against the bar, puffing on his pipe, his cheeks ruddy with pride. “Aye,” he said. “The best kind. Warm hearth, full bellies, and songs we ain’t heard a hundred times already.”

In that moment, the tavern felt like the center of the world—where names didn’t matter, where coin meant less than company, and where the fire burned just for them.

The tavern door creaked open, and Serela Dawnspark stepped in as if sunlight had taken the form of a woman. Her robe shimmered faintly in the hearthlight, a bright sky-blue worn soft from travel, and her boots squelched with mud from the hills beyond the city. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, her eyes bright and merry as she took in the room with delight.

“Ah, what a fine collection of wrinkled mugs and old souls,” she declared, her voice lilting like birdsong over the low murmur of patrons. “This feels like home already.”

She strolled toward the bar without hesitation, dropping her satchel beside her stool with a thump. It jingled softly—metal, maybe glass, certainly oddities within. She leaned across the counter with a cheeky grin. “Steak, please. With potatoes, a salad if you've got leaves still breathing. And water. Magic dries the throat, and wine fogs the mind. And I’m not done thinking today.”

She dropped three gold coins onto the counter and they rolled, one falling into Bilo’s apron, another skittering across the wood and bumping a dwarf’s cup. “The gold’s excited to meet new friends,” she said with a chuckle, not lifting a finger to stop them.

Bilo, surprised but amused, scooped them up. “We don’t get many mages with jokes in their pockets,” he said, eyeing her kindly. “Water it is. But the steak’ll take a spell.”

Ulga leaned out from the kitchen doorway with a raised brow. “She’s got laugh lines already. I like her.”

Serela turned and waved at the whole room. “Well met, my friends. If you’ve got questions about the stars, mushrooms, curses, or the correct way to hug a griffon—I’m your girl.”

The tavern seemed a touch brighter just then. Some turned back to their cups with grins, others whispered curious guesses about her. But Bilo and Ulga knew straightaway—this one was trouble of the best kind.

Serela leaned back on her stool, the water glass sweating beside her untouched, her plate scraped clean from the last bite of seared steak and peppered potatoes. Around her, the tavern's warmth gathered like a shawl, and her voice lowered a note into the kind of hush that invites listening.

Bilo cleaned a mug. "Where you come from then traveler ?"

"I was raised on a hill farm," she began, "just outside of Meathollow, where the goats bleated louder than sermons and the wind taught you when to pick herbs."

Bilo looked at her black hair. "You must come from a good family."

Serela looked at him with sparkling eyes."We have a crooked house with a stovepipe that leaned like it was thinking hard. My father read old books aloud when the fire was right and told riddles that made the stew taste smarter. My mother grew marjoram and laughed with her eyes."

Her gaze turned toward the fire. "Then came a summer like no other—lightning cracked the ridge, dry wind rushed through the valley like a thief, and our whole world caught flame. The goats got loose, the books turned to ash, and the stones of our hearth were too hot to cry beside."

Ulga paused by the bar, ladle in hand, her eyes steady.

"Mum wept for days," Serela said. "She stood with her hands in the ash and didn't speak. My father, though—he put his arms around us both and said, 'We've still got each other… and your wit, which might be flammable too.'"

She smiled softly. "We built a barn into a home. No windows but plenty of sun through the slats. It was smaller, but we filled it with more laughter than the old house ever heard. Learned to roast goat on scorched stone—it's better than it sounds, especially when everything else tastes like smoke."

Ulga snorted. "Sounds like something Bilo would try after one too many tastings in the cellar."

Serela winked. "If fire comes for you," she said, lifting her glass, "offer it a seat, not a scream. And maybe it'll warm you instead of eat you."

Bilo muttered behind the bar, "You've a tongue like good ale—burns a bit but leaves you feeling bold."

Serela's fingers traced idle circles on the rim of her water glass as the tavern crowd leaned in closer, drawn by the gentle cadence of her story. The fire crackled softly, and the low murmur of spoons in stew bowls made the perfect rhythm behind her voice.

"When I was fifteen," she said, "I apprenticed myself to a wandering wizard named Corrim the Unimpressed. He smelled like old ink and wet parchment, and he muttered spells under his breath like other men mutter curses. The first thing he taught me was how to tell a toadstool from a death-cap. The second was how to dodge a squirrel throwing acorns from a tree."

She smiled as the tavern chuckled.

"He took me to a ruined library, tucked in the woods past a stream that ran like silver thread. The place had been forgotten for decades, overrun with raccoons who used the scroll shelves as beds and the lecterns as scratching posts. It took me three weeks to clear them out—charmed them into thinking it was haunted by angry badgers."

Bilo let out a surprised grunt. "You haunted raccoons?"

Serela grinned. "With sound illusions and a few chicken bones. They still haven't come back. Once I had the place to myself, I read every tome, every scorched scroll, even the index volumes twice. I copied diagrams by candlelight until my fingers blistered. Set my eyebrows on fire trying to master Flame Jet. Corrim just laughed and said, 'Now you're initiated.'"

She looked to the hearth then, a soft sadness behind her smile.

"When Corrim died—peacefully, in his chair with a book on his chest—I buried him in the grove behind the library. Laid his old wand across his chest, the one carved with runes he never translated for me. I whispered thanks. He taught me more than spells. He taught me how to think. How to notice."

Ulga nodded, stirring a pot behind the bar. "Good teachers do that. Leave the world sharper than they found it."

Serela lifted her glass in quiet salute. "Loss teaches you what time is for," she said. "For learning, for loving, and for casting fireballs—"

Bilo interrupted with a smirk. "Responsibly?"

She winked. "Mostly."

Serela leaned back in her chair, boots crossed at the ankles, her voice light and amused as the tavern crowd leaned in again, sensing another tale on its way.

"Now," she began, "Greenspire Pass is lovely in the spring—flowers bloom like gossip in a noble court, and the air smells like pine and possibility. But it's also a favorite haunt for bandits with more ego than sense."

She paused to sip her water, then continued, “They leapt out from behind a boulder, masks on, swords drawn. Told me to hand over my gold or they'd cut me from shoulder to shoe.”

Bilo grunted, “Charming.”

Serela nodded solemnly. “Very. So I smiled, dipped into my satchel, and offered them a handful of bright red berries. ‘Rare mountain fruit,’ I said. ‘Gives you the strength of three men.’ They shoved them in their mouths before I even blinked.”

Ulga, wiping her hands on a towel, raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“They started croaking like frogs.” Serela grinned wide. “Couldn’t shout, couldn’t bark orders, just ribbit and burp. They waved their swords around, looking furious, but you try mugging someone when you sound like pondlife.”

The tavern roared with laughter.

“They fled, confused and humiliated. I left a note under the rock they’d used for cover. ‘Practice better manners before the next robbery attempt.’”

“And the berries?” Thora asked, leaning against the kitchen door.

“Oh, they were real—enchanted with a minor vocal polymorph charm. Greenspire Berrylings. Taste like tart apples with a hint of thyme.”

Ulga squinted. “Wait. You ate them?”

“Better,” said Serela, “I baked them. Made a lovely pie and sold it to a guard captain on patrol. Called it ‘Throat-Fruited Banditberry.’ He asked for seconds.”

Ulga snorted into her apron. “You baked with bandit berries?”

Serela beamed. “You see, even bad men can contribute to dinner—just not the way they expected.”

Serela swirled her water with a fingertip, watching the ripples catch the light as if they were echoes of a time long gone. Her voice turned softer, laced with something less playful.

“I once met a blacksmith in Ironvale,” she said. “Name was Harven. A quiet man, tall as a pine and twice as stubborn. Had hands made of steel—literally. His real ones were lost to a forge accident when he was young. But those metal hands? They were gentle. He could catch a falling coal like it was a snowflake.”

The tavern grew hushed. Even the hearth seemed to lean in.

“I stayed in Ironvale longer than usual. Helped with the books in the local school, sang on festival nights. But mostly, I sat beside Harven’s forge. He'd hum while he worked. We shared soup—mushroom and barley, his favorite. We watched the stars. And I started thinking… maybe that was it. Maybe I’d finally found a hearth that didn’t flicker.”

She smiled faintly, then shrugged. “But Harven… he carried loss like iron in his chest. His wife, his brother, a child. Grief had made a quiet home in him, and there just wasn’t room for me.”

Bilo murmured, “Did he love you back?”

“He might’ve,” Serela said. “But some hearts can’t say it aloud. Not because they don’t feel it—but because they’re afraid the words will fall apart.”

She reached into her pouch and took out a small copper ring, worn smooth, glinting faintly in the firelight. “He gave me this. Said it was forged from old scrap and new ash. ‘Not perfect,’ he said. ‘But it’s honest.’”

She tucked it back in gently. “Not all love lasts. But it can still be good.”

Bilo leaned on the bar and exhaled. “That’s the saddest happy thing I’ve heard all week.”

“Exactly!” Serela beamed, and the warmth returned to her eyes. “You’re listening well, barkeep. Maybe I’ll write a song about you.”

“One winter,” Serela said, propping her boots near the hearth and warming her fingers around a mug of mulled cider, “I found myself snowed in up in the Mistral Range. Nothing but a single-room cabin, a sack of dried beans, and a spellbook that was more decorative than practical—unless you find much use in conjuring lights shaped like ducks.”

The tavern chuckled gently, drawn into the picture she painted.

“Wolves came on the second night. I heard them first—low howls and paws crunching the snow outside. They didn’t charge in or scratch at the door. Just… watched. Every night. Like sentries of winter.”

“What’d you do?” asked Thora from across the room, eyes wide.

“I sang,” Serela said. “Quiet songs. Peaceful ones. Then I started tossing out scraps—little handfuls of beans cooked over a miserable fire. Cold beans, but it’s the thought that counts.”

She smiled at the memory. “Named them, too. Graymuzzle, Snort, Lady Sniff, Button-Ears… and the big one, I called Baron. He always sat apart, head tilted like he understood every word I sang.”

Bilo leaned on the counter, grinning. “And they left you alone?”

“Never touched a shingle. On the fifth morning, I opened the door and found a squirrel. Still warm. Perfect little gift. From Baron, I’m sure.”

She paused for effect, raising her mug. “That’s called trade diplomacy. I gave them beans. They gave me meat. Better than some merchants I know.”

The tavern roared with laughter, and Serela grinned.

“I stayed snowed in for fifteen days. Read my spellbook by candlelight, played songs into the white silence, and counted stars with wolves as my choir. When the caravan finally arrived, I packed up and waved goodbye.”

She looked into the fire, eyes soft. “And I missed them more than the people. We were just quiet neighbors. No questions. No judgments. And I swear… one of them winked.”

Serela leaned her elbows on the bar, her fingers wrapped loosely around a clay mug, her voice quieter now, rippling like soft light through the tavern’s warmth. “It was early autumn when I wandered into the edge of Tarth Hollow,” she began, “looking for old spell stones, maybe a charm or two the ruins hadn’t swallowed.”

The room fell still at the name. Even Bilo paused mid-polish, and a few miners exchanged wary glances.

“Yes,” she nodded, reading the air, “the Hollow with the bone-walkers. Undead and chill fog and nothing but crowsong. I wasn’t there long before I heard the crying. Thin, like wind in a flute.”

She took a breath. “I found her in the corner of a broken cellar. No shoes, dirt on her face, a cut across her forehead. I didn’t ask questions—I just knelt and told her we were going home.”

Someone near the hearth murmured, “How old?”

“Couldn’t have been more than six. She didn’t speak. Just clung to me.”

A faint clang of pots from the kitchen underscored the hush.

“I fought off a ghoul in a sunken courtyard with a frying pan—mine—and a borrowed shield charm I’d barely practiced. We made it out through thorn and stone, her arms around my neck, breath light as candle smoke.”

She smiled at the memory. “She didn’t say a word for three days. Then, while I was trying to feed her soup, she looked up and said, ‘You smell like warm bread.’” Serela laughed, and her eyes sparkled. “Still the best compliment I’ve ever received.”

Ulga had quietly set down a tray and was wiping her cheek with the edge of her sleeve. “You’re a walking hearth,” she said softly. “Just don’t set the stools on fire.”

Serela chuckled, raising her mug. “No promises.”

She looked to the fire again, voice gentling like the end of a lullaby. “I took her to the Brighthaven temple orphanage. They’re good folk there. I visit every year. She’s older now. Reads better than I do. And every time, she hugs me the same way she did in the Hollow. Like she knows I didn’t let go.”

There was silence for a beat longer, the kind that doesn’t need words, and then Ilondra’s lute picked up a soft tune. One of hope. Of gentle rescue.

Serela swirled her cup of water, watching the ripples catch firelight, her smile wry and a little sheepish. “You ever think you’ve got everything under control, until you suddenly don’t?”

Bilo snorted behind the bar. “Every brewing season.”

“Well,” she said, “one spring, I thought I could stop a thunderstorm. There was a village at the edge of Harthfield Ridge, where the soil runs like pudding after rain. Flooding was a problem. I thought I’d help.”

She leaned forward, hands spreading as if to draw the memory in the air. “I used old weather charms, newer scripts, and even a prayer I half-remembered from a traveling monk. Looked very impressive. I had candles and chalk lines and even the right herbs—probably.”

The tavern chuckled gently.

“But I didn’t account for the ley-line surge that runs through that ridge on equinox. So, instead of calming the clouds, I called down a lightning bolt that turned an oak into firewood and burned a farmer’s cottage to ash.”

Ulga winced, setting down a tray. “And you lived?”

“Barely,” Serela said with a dry grin. “I ran toward the flames, not away. Helped get the goats out first. Then I paid every coin I had to rebuild that home, and I stayed three weeks to help that family repair their fields.”

She sat back, eyes distant. “Magic isn’t a crown,” she said. “It’s a shovel. You either dig graves or gardens.”

Bilo nodded slowly. “And you chose the garden.”

Serela looked at him. “That mistake taught me more than a dozen clean spells ever did. When you destroy something, you don’t get to vanish with guilt—you plant something in its place.”

There was a pause, then Bilo raised his mug. “To ruins and rebuilding.”

Serela clinked it gently with her water. “And to learning which one you’re standing in.”

Serela leaned back on the bench, wiping her mouth with the edge of her sleeve, eyes soft and belly full. The steak was gone, the salad picked clean, and her cup sparkled with only the last sip of water clinging to the rim. She looked around at the tavern—fire warm in the hearth, faces glowing in the flicker—and gave a gentle sigh.

“You know why I smile?” she asked, half to herself, half to the room. “Because the world already has too much thunder. I’d rather be a sunbeam.”

Bilo raised an eyebrow from behind the bar. “Sunbeam with a spellbook, eh?”

She grinned. “Exactly. I’ve seen good folk buried, watched cities crumble, held hands that went cold. And still, every day, I wake up and choose light. Not because it’s easy. Because it matters.”

There was a hush, a thoughtful beat, then she leaned forward again and added, “Also, I once teleported a drunken ogre into a pigsty while trying to rescue a stolen donkey.”

Ulga nearly dropped her ladle. “You what?”

“Oh yes. He fell in love with one of the pigs and wouldn’t come out for three days. Meanwhile, the donkey had wandered back on its own. Worst rescue attempt ever. But the ogre wrote me a poem afterward.”

Bilo chuckled. “And did you keep it?”

“Framed it,” she said. “It’s written in mud and ale stains, but it rhymes. Sort of.”

Laughter rolled around the tavern—deep, full-bellied, even from the usually silent corner where a miner with soot on his cheeks cracked the first smile anyone had seen from him in days.

“I’ve cried my share,” Serela said, quieter now. “But I choose laughter. Because it keeps me light.”

No one answered for a moment. But every face seemed warmer. Even the fire, somehow, seemed to glow a little brighter.

Serela stood by the bar with her satchel slung over one shoulder, the warmth of the tavern soft on her back as fog kissed the windows. She dropped a neat stack of silver and gold on the counter, not counting it, just smiling. “That should cover the meal, the music, and a bit for tavern repairs,” she said, “and Ulga’s excellent salad. Never let that recipe die.”

Before Bilo could thank her, she reached into her robe and fished out a curious charm—roughly the size of a coin, a small sun carved from a bottle cork, with rays formed from a twisted spoon handle. She pressed it into Bilo’s hand. “For when the skies are grey inside. Doesn’t cast any spells—just remembers joy.”

Bilo turned it in his fingers, and for a moment the room seemed to hush again.

Ulga came from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and Serela wrapped her in a warm hug. “Keep growing what you grow,” she whispered. “People eat more than food when they come here.”

Then she gave a deep, theatrical bow to the room, sending her robe sweeping like a wave across the floor. “Good folk! May your drinks stay full and your chairs warm. I go where the road hums beneath my boots.”

She stepped into the thickening mist outside, her silhouette framed in the doorway for a breath longer than seemed possible. Then she vanished.

Out front, her footsteps crunched down the road. Her voice floated back, cheerful and bright through the dusk, “The world’s still worth wandering. You just have to bring your own lamp!”

Bilo stood still for a time, thumb brushing over the little sun in his palm. Behind him, Ulga sniffed and busied herself with plates.

“Some guests warm a chair,” Bilo said softly. “She warmed the room.”